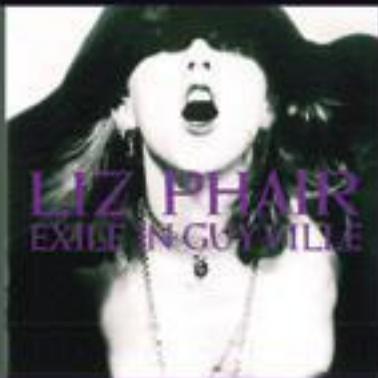


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**EXILE IN  
GUYVILLE**  
by Gina Arnold

B L O O M S B U R Y



## EXILE IN GUYVILLE

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# Exile in Guyville



Gina Arnold

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3. "Glory" (1:29)
4. "Dance of the Seven Veils" (2:29)
5. "Never Said" (3:16)
6. "Soap Star Joe" (2:44)
7. "Explain it to Me" (3:11)
8. "Canary" (3:19)
9. "Mesmerizing" (3:55)
10. "Fuck and Run" (3:07)
11. "Girls! Girls! Girls!" (2:20)
12. "Divorce Song" (3:20)
13. "Shatter" (5:28)
14. "Flower" (2:03)
15. "Johnny Sunshine" (3:27)
16. "Gunshy" (3:15)
17. "Stratford-On-Guy" (2:59)
18. "Strange Loop" (3:57)



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# Introduction: Written in My Seoul

The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.

L. P. Hartley

First, let me state what this is not. This is not a book about your average, ordinary radio-listening, record-buying, rock-loving consumer of mainstream music, the type one could associate with The Rolling Stones. This is also not a book about women's issues, or identity politics, or the way that white privilege pervades popular culture, or about the branding and marketing of sexualized pop stuff, the kind of story which one tends to associate with young blonde singer-songwriters who have names like Liz Phair. Nor is this an addendum to recent complaints on the popular twenty-something news source BuzzFeed that the Coachella Music Festival is too male-dominated.<sup>1</sup> Although unlike the worlds of country, blues, mainstream pop, and most other genres, except

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<sup>1</sup> Ritter, Chris. "Where Are All the Women at Coachella?" *BuzzFeed*, April 17, 2013. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/verymuchso/where-are-all-the-women-at-coachella> (accessed April 19, 2013).

hardcore rap, the discrepancy in gender numbers is huge in this particular field of play, the truth is that 'twas ever thus, and hardly needs restatement. Coachella may have fewer women than men on the bill, but it has more than early iterations of Lollapalooza ever did.

Most of all, this is not a book about some imaginary competition—that ongoing contest in which records are ranked in order of a particular party's idea of importance, influence, and some supposed standard of aesthetic excellence. In fact, ideally, this book is one long argument *against* that contest. In that normative world of music-as-competition (the most obvious sign of which can be seen in the preponderance of lists that both print and online publications are constantly publishing, the 100 most this and the 500 most that), The Rolling Stones' 1972 album *Exile on Main St.* is a clear winner. And this book is not disputing its place there. What it *is* disputing is merely the fact that "a place" like that exists at all.

In other words, this book is intended as a radical rethinking of the way aesthetic judgments in rock music are made in the first place. It is a book about a particular time and place, a scene and a scion, an artist—Liz Phair—and a record she made in 1993. Mostly, though, it is about an imagined community, the indie rock scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the scene that gave (and took away) the band Nirvana, as well as bands like Pixies, Sonic Youth, The Replacements, Soul Asylum ... and the list goes on.

I begin my book on Liz Phair with a statement of what it is not as a warning to readers, because writing about music is such a delicate proposition. Delicate? I think the word I'm looking for is didactic. Indeed, the

first time I wrote a book about a band, way back in the 1990s, I recall a sage warning my editor gave to me.

People like to *do* drugs, not read about doing drugs ...  
And the same thing goes for music.

He asked me to keep this in mind while writing about the band Nirvana. What he meant was that his interest was not in the music, but in the members of Nirvana themselves, and what was happening around them. The music, he felt, spoke for itself.

At the time I thought that was kind of cynical, but now I see he was exactly right. After all, writing about music is like describing the color blue. You can try to explain what you see when you see blue, but it is unlikely that a blind person will picture the exact shade you mean. Similarly, you can write about music all you want, but the chances are you will be unable to transmit what is beautiful and true about it—and most especially, what is beautiful about it to *you*. The best one can do is to write all your way around it, describing sensations and opinions that are at bottom just the feelings it invokes in a single individual soul, feelings that may depend on something as fragile and as momentary as the weather you were experiencing when you heard the music first, or the smell that wafted by you on the wind.

And yet despite that inherent impossibility, for many years, I did my best to describe music to others. Not only did I describe it to the best of my ability, but I tried to tell them what to think about it. It sounds so arrogant in retrospect, but indeed, for many years I wrote impassioned screeds extolling and excoriating various

bands and artists, under the mistaken impression that it mattered which records were heard more than others. Somehow, I never realized that I was simply touting acts for an industry that didn't care *which* record got sold, as long as it got sold. I thought I was an advocate, but I was just a merchant, helping to move product. And in the end, all my passion and vitriol got replaced by apps that say "If you liked that, then you may like this." Not only do these apps suggest other music, but they tell you what your friends like or are listening to, thus replacing the human element, whereby in order to find out about music you went to a friend's house or a record store or a live show, or you have a conversation or listen to the radio or read a well-written music review.

The discursive method has been outsourced by the algorithms that run Pandora and iTunes and Google Music and Spotify and Amazon and Last.fm, and as disconcerting as that may be, it is a fact. It is also a fact that, because of these applications, vinyl is now an all-but-dead technology. Oh, you can still collect vinyl records and buy a turntable—indeed, sales of these items are said to be on the rise—but you can only do so in the same spirit that you can buy a pony and a stable to keep it in; that is, in the rarified, elitist spirit of a connoisseur of the past.

Many people mourn vinyl. But for me, the move forward to the world of digital music has been a good thing, not a bad one. Indeed, looking back, I am ashamed now to recognize how blind I was to my role in the cycle of music consumption: every band I went to bat for, every flame war I took part in, every word I put on paper was simply a *ka-ching* in a cash register that I had no access

to, since I was not an owner of the means of production, i.e. a magazine publisher or a record company.

This is not to denigrate listening to popular music, which can provide solace as strong as snake antivenom when you are down and disenchanted with life. It is merely to denigrate the role of critic, or, as George W. Bush put it, of “decider,” in the question of exactly which anti-snake venom is the best for all to take.

It took me a long time to learn that, but learn it I did. So herein I take up my pen in a different spirit altogether. Rather than address the brilliance of a particular song or chord sequence, rather than argue for the genius of the singer and songwriter Liz Phair, I want to address the milieu that her work came from—the titular Guyville, the people who lived there, their values, their hopes, and their strangely skewed relationship to capitalism, criticism, and the culture of the twentieth century. I want to consider all the ways that the past *was* a different country, and the way that, back in that strange nation, we record buyers and music lovers were shaped and changed by a particular moment in history a moment that the double album *Exile in Guyville* responded to so eloquently.

It was a real moment, and a real album. So it follows that Guyville is a real place, not a fictional construct stolen from a line in an obscure album called *Stull*. You won't find Guyville on Google Maps, but for all that it exists in a more solid form than, say, Diagon Alley and the Hotel California, two noted fictional universes. Unlike those locations, Guyville is not merely a paracosm—that is, a distinctive imaginary world, with its own geography, history, and language—but the album

*Exile in Guyville*, like Middle Earth and Hogwarts, may well be. That is to say, Guyville describes a real place in Chicago at a certain time, but the album *Exile in Guyville* merely provides a detailed description of imaginary scenes and places that are recognizable to listeners because they represent a certain kind of truth. They are, as Benedict Anderson, the author of the phrase “imagined community,” once put it, “a complex gloss on the word ‘meanwhile.’”<sup>2</sup>

“Meanwhile” covers a lot of ground. In my head, it takes up the space of empty hours, occupying the spot which might otherwise be spent thinking prosaic thoughts about real life, or banally getting on with things. Instead, for me, as I believe is the case with all true lovers of art and music and therefore the readers of this book, my favorite novels, songs, and movies are all always ongoing in my head, and they speak to me far more profoundly than the events of every life. Often I think I am a better-informed citizen of Middlemarch, Barsetshire, and Nea So Copros<sup>3</sup> than I am of San Francisco; sometimes when I want to go to the beach and I can’t, I reread the first chapter of *Tender is the Night*.

These literary landscapes have brought me comfort and pleasure over the years, but perhaps no imagined community has ever been more real to me than Guyville, a few square acres in the city of Chicago where certain

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1991), 20.

<sup>3</sup> The incarnation of Seoul 1,000 years in the future, as imagined by David Mitchell in the novel *Cloud Atlas*. (New York: Random House, 2004).

indie rock bands and their fans roamed wild in the early 1990s. Guyville was first name-checked in a song, “Goodbye to Guyville,” written by the band The Urge Overkill in 1992, but its more permanent existence as a real domain on planet earth was solidified by the release of the 1993 album *Exile in Guyville* by their friend and fan Liz Phair. The Urge Overkill song merely referenced Guyville as a place to get away from, but Phair fleshed out the phrase and made it into a real location. In her work, Guyville is not only a neighborhood and an era, but an actual state of mind. It’s a place I and many others have lived, even outside of Chicago. In other words, Guyville is a profoundly fictional construct, but it is oddly recognizable. The imagined community it represents isn’t really limited to Wicker Park, Chicago, but describes the world of indie rock fans in the days before MP3s, iTunes, Smartphones, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Pandora, Spotify, StubHub, Amazon, Google Analytics, and other digital technologies swept the conventional music industry aside. In the process, these technologies transformed (or eliminated) many of the notions that shaped how music was bought and sold, as well as how it was critiqued and evaluated, but it is not yet clear whether the technologies have also eliminated the neighborhood (Guyville) and its denizens. Guyville is a place that lived and died by its aesthetic principles, and a brief listen to the iPod playlists of your typical college student, or a glance at the pages of *Pitchfork*, *Vice*, and *The Onion’s AV Club*, will reveal music that exhibits the same kind of sounds and lyrics.

Even so, I will argue here that Guyville lies in ruins, wrecked in part by digitization, and in part by a culture



that outlived its usefulness. Guyville is gone, and this book will be its memorial.

*Exile in Guyville* is a record that reeks of obsolescence. Listening to it (or re-listening to it) as an MP3 is not quite the same experience as hearing it on vinyl for the first time, because it was conceived of as a double record on vinyl. Of course one can still hear all the music on it in other audio formats, but the number of people who will hear it now after slipping the vinyl carefully out of its cardboard cover and placing it on a turntable, wiping its surface with a dust cloth, and dropping a needle on it is very small. Nowadays, people will listen to this music in another way altogether, just as Liz Phair, as an artist, has subsequently continued her musical career path along a set of very different grooves. Both ways of listening and of creating music are valid, but in order to reassess *Exile in Guyville*, one needs to step back mentally, in time and space, and in order to write this book, I personally had to step back literally. That is why the majority of this book was written in a Starbucks in the Gangnam neighborhood of Seoul, South Korea, several years before the song “Gangnam Style” by Psy (Park Jae-Sang) became a viral sensation on YouTube, introducing the entire world to the name of Seoul’s fanciest shopping area. For my purposes, the success of that song has been both fortuitous and slightly ironic, because everything about “Gangnam Style,” including its sound, its instrumentation, its lyrics, and its viral dissemination, only serve to highlight the global changes in how music is listened to today—that is, the practical and technical changes that have occurred since 1993, the changes that flattened Guyville. If you think about it, you’ll realize that this is

so, for it is impossible to imagine a dance pop song track sung in Korean being widely heard—much less appreciated—in America before the digital turn. Moreover, as was the case with the album *Exile in Guyville*, part of the charm of the song is its titular insistence on a locale as a sensibility.

Psy's music owes nothing to indie rock. But the success of that single does owe something to a newfound curiosity about, and appreciation of, rock music made by other cultures. That kind of curiosity about the music scenes in other places was a big part of the indie rock value system. So perhaps it is fitting that Gangnam is where I was living when the spirit hit me to write this book—south of the River Han, in a flat, gleaming neighborhood of high rises and neon lights, that to me seemed straight out of a James Bond movie. Every morning, I would walk down Seocho-gu<sup>4</sup> through the stultifying heat to the Gangnam Starbucks, plug in my laptop, and think about the distant past. And lest anyone think I came to this café in order to find American-style espresso, please note that on the quarter of a mile or so walk I took to get here every morning, I passed ten or twelve other gourmet coffee bars, including but not limited to Tous Les Jours, Caffè Pascucci, Delispresso, Presso Design Coffee, Bella Caffè, Angel In Us Coffee, Apgujeong Roasting Company, and A Twosome Place. Because we live in a global village, these are all chains, and are much like their counterpart cafés in America, i.e. they have blonde wood floors, modern art, groovy

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<sup>4</sup> “gu” means neighborhood, or area, in Korean. Guyville is located in Wicker Park-gu.

ceramic mugs, every type of latte and frappuccino, bagels, and indie rock playing softly in the background. They probably even have a Korean version of *The Onion* being given away for free, but my knowledge of the Hangul alphabet isn't quite good enough yet to find it.

In America, a lot of my friends really hate Starbucks. They believe that it is *ersatz* and corporate and ubiquitous and a blight on the landscape, a symbol of the massification of culture and so forth. Also, compared to many independent coffee shops, it's expensive. But one reason I chose this location to write in is that Starbucks is practically cheap compared to the other places. It is \$4 to \$6 for an espresso drink in Korea, but thanks to the magic of economies of scale, a mere \$3.50 at the 'Bux. Still, saving 50 cents wasn't my real motivation for coming here to write. A far more important reason was that writing at Starbucks helped to put me in a Liz Phair mindset, Liz Phair circa 1993, that is: Starbucks reminds me of the 1990s—a time when there were cities in the world where it was hard to find a large, strong espresso, days when Starbucks didn't seem like a mega-chain, but like the fount of a brave new world. After all, the ubiquitous Starbucks store we are all so familiar with today was born in the '90s and, unlike the rest of us, it hasn't changed very much since.

South Korea in 2011 may sound like a funny place to be writing about indie rock, because (in South Korea), indie rock—by which I mean melodic guitar-based rock with no fancy chord changes or startling rhythmic innovation, produced by individuals who considered themselves to be working outside the mainstream music industry—never meant anything. In 1993, South Korea

was only six years shy of dictatorship; it was still poor and Eastern-loving instead of rich and Western-facing. There, indie rock has no history or context in which to put itself, but that is why when one is here, one is able to start out clean, remembering those times purely. It is as if one were in a prison, as it were. Or in nursery school. Or in the future. Indeed, the only way that Seoul resembles Chicago in the 1990s is in its weather, with which it has much in common. It's about a million degrees in Seoul in the summer, hot and humid, like the American Midwest. All summer long, invisible cicadas are shrieking their heads off in the fleeting forests that dot the urban jungle here, and the air is thick and hot. Chicago is a big urban city. But Seoul is the second-largest city on the planet, with a metropolitan population of twenty-five million. It is tied with Mexico, D.F.

Today it's different, of course, but Starbucks as it originally existed in Seattle in the 1990s wouldn't have been out of place in an episode of *Portlandia*. The baristas would have all had their own DJ night they were inviting you to, and been mixologists on the side. In those days before the obesity epidemic and the slow food movement, the chain sold fantastically unhealthy large sugar cookies with pink icing, and, because Smartphones hadn't been invented and Wi-Fi wasn't widespread, people sat around these places reading actual newsprint and listening to actual cassette mix tapes. The newsprint invariably would prove to be the independent weekly of that city, the *Chicago Reader* or the *Village Voice* or the *Phoenix New Times* or Oakland and Berkeley's *East Bay Express* or Atlanta's *Creative Loafing*, papers that devoted

an inordinate amount of space to local music writers and writing, to go along with the many pages of advertising of local music venues. And the mix tapes made by the baristas would coincidentally often showcase songs by bands that were playing these same bars, and that were advertising in the local weeklies that the music writers, reading their papers in Starbucks, were writing about. The mix tapes would feature bands like (but not limited to) Pavement and Soul Asylum and Trenchmouth and Tortoise and Big Black and Cows and Fugazi, bands on labels like (but not limited to) Matador, Twin Tones, and Thrill Jockey; Dischord, SST and Sub Pop.

That atmosphere no longer permeates an American Starbucks, but in the Seoul Starbucks, it is possible to get a whiff of it. It is probably something about the white clientele here in Asia, which is limited almost entirely to post-college young men who are teaching English in *bagwons*, the ubiquitous academies where Koreans go to school after school to learn English. These guys more often than not wear skinny jeans and groovy t-authentic shirts from Uniqlo with well-known Chinese and Japanese products advertised on them (Meiji chocolate, Sapporo beer). Usually they are recent graduates of Dartmouth or Northwestern, unsure of what to do after leaving the comforts of an American four-year university, and so are taking a year or two to work in Asia. It's a good deal and slightly more adventurous than getting an internship in a field their parents wish they would enter. Not only is the nightlife fun and the pay pretty good, but between gigs they can bop off to Bali or Kashmir. So for today's twenty-something white guy, Seoul is Guyville redux, only it's a bigger, brighter, more wired version of it.

This may be why, minus their interest in music and ironic facial hair, the guys in the Seoul Starbucks remind me of the guys in Guyville, of Chicago in the early 1990s. Like those guys, they wear horn-rimmed glasses, slick back their hair, and sport holey jeans and Converse All Stars, and if you get into conversation with some of them, they are friendly, but aloof. It will turn out, eventually, that they know more about something than you do. This being 2011 and not 1993, however, it is probable that what they know more about is not the latest release by Royal Trux, but Mandarin Chinese, biofuel economics, or the situation in Syria. These guys do listen to lots of music by bands like Animal Collective, The National, The Decemberists, Bon Iver and so forth, but it's not as important a part of the conversation anymore, at least not in person. The important conversations about music may be going on in very short sentences on Twitter and GChat, but in person, not so much. And as if to underscore that difference, here in Starbucks in Seoul, they play the music of Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, Neko Case, and Cat Power. Gone are the days when the chain pitched out Sting, Sheryl Crow and Adele; since the invention of the MP3, even the Seoul Starbucks plays music with some cachet.

Anyway, this is all just to say that if you happen to be working on a manuscript for a book about America in the late twentieth century, then a Starbucks in Seoul isn't the worst place to start. And that's important, because very little else about Korea is going to put you in that mindset. Hell, very little about *America* is going to do that. Going back to that time before the internet, before DVRs and Google and cell phones, before Liz

Phair's *Exile in Guyville* was released, is a mental exercise akin to imagining a life without an answering machine, or television. It's necessary, however, because there is no way one can understand where and what Guyville referred to without understanding the *kairos* of the era.

*Exile in Guyville* reached its twentieth anniversary in 2013, an event that has called forth several rethinks of its place in the pop pantheon. Despite the fact that it was a record that depended in part on its context—in other words, that it appeared at a singular moment in music history such that it achieved a kind of notoriety that sometimes veiled its splendor simply as a piece of art—it turns out it is well up there in the hearts and minds of many listeners, both male and female. It's a great record, and one that deserves any and all accolades it ever received. If you've heard it, you probably know why you love it, but if you haven't, you may need a short primer to understand where it was coming from and what it was going on about.

To begin, one must first know exactly where Guyville is, or was (whether it exists anymore is a question that is open to debate). As previously mentioned, Guyville was the name coined by The Urge Overkill in "Goodbye to Guyville" to describe the small neighborhood scene they ruled over in a part of Chicago, in the early 1990s. Guyville referred to Wicker Park, or Bucktown as it was formerly known, and those who lived there were adherents to the indie rock scene. These adherents considered themselves as having escaped from the mainstream rock world. Guyville (and Wicker Park and indie rock in general) was a scene populated by young

people—most of them just out of college—who enjoyed going to nightclubs to see obscure rock bands, and who also enjoyed collecting those bands’ records. A number of these people were in bands themselves. It was a fairly small world, and it generally centered around a record label that had been started specifically to press and distribute records by one particular music scene’s best bands.

At that time, record collecting as a hobby had reached its apex. Although the CD format had been available for a dozen or so years,<sup>5</sup> in 1993, vinyl was still the preferred format for a large sect of fans of punk-derived rock music, and this was catered to by a number of independently owned record labels. Shut out of the normative radio world where rock songs and playlists were determined by payola, favors and clout, indie rock labels carved their relatively small audience out of college radio listeners and fanzine readers. The labels billed themselves as “alternative” or alternative to mainstream fashion, mainstream beliefs, mainstream taste—and those who liked them prided themselves on that outsider status.

The indie rock world had a number of extremely pleasant things about it. Like many imagined communities, it was friendly, and small, and cohesive, and it considered itself embattled, so it presented a united front. It was not exclusive—you could find your way into it in any city simply by picking up an alternative newspaper and going to that night’s most highly touted

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<sup>5</sup> The CD itself was invented in the 1970s, but CD players only began being sold in the US in 1983. By 1988, 400 million CDs were being manufactured worldwide (*MAC Audio News*, November 1989).



show—and those who peopled it were generally well read, quirky, and not in thrall to the horrid prevailing commercial values or beauty standards or fashion statements of the time. There are way more good things to say about the indie rock world than bad things, but at the same time, it had some features that mimicked corporate rock culture, and one of those things was that it was based on a mentality that liked lists and loud music. One wouldn't go so far as to say everyone who determined what belonged in the indie world and what didn't was male. It may have seemed like that at times, since with a few notable exceptions (LA's Lisa Fancher, owner of Frontier Records, and for one example, Bettina Richards, who moved her Thrill Jockey label to Chicago in 1995), most of the independent label owners were men. But for some reason, women's roles were diminished. On stage, they often labored as bass players or drummers. In the business offices of the record labels that released these records, they frequently had the role of publicist, where they had the job of calling up the many male rock critics that staffed the country's newspapers and pitching acts to them. Certainly, women were welcomed in the indie rock scene for all the reasons women are always welcome, but taken as a whole, they have had almost no role in the ownership of the system and almost no voice in determining what the world would look or sound like. Indeed, in that world the only thing rarer than a female record label owner was a female recording engineer. (There are a few: Trina Shoemaker, Sally Browder, Sylvia Massy, Leanne Unger ... but that incredibly small number represents four decades of recording—and therefore pales in comparison to the number of male ones.)

There were also, of course, a certain number of women playing in indie rock bands. Some of the best known are named Kim: Kim Deal, Kim Gordon, and Kim Warnick. Deal helped found Pixies. Gordon was a founding member of Sonic Youth, and Warnick played in The Fastbacks. Additionally, there were the drummers: Janet Beveridge Bean of Chicago's Eleventh Dream Day and Georgia Hubley of Yo La Tengo, to name just two. There were also many all-woman bands, like Babes in Toyland, Scrawl, Veruca Salt, L7 and Tiger Trap, and there were plenty of female singers also, like Thalia Zedek of Come and Hope Sandoval of Mazzy Star. (I am confining this list to American acts, which is why PJ Harvey is not on it.) Yet somehow, the presence of these female singers and drummers and bassists and guitarists only managed to emphasize their rarity. They were never able to add up to a significant enough proportion of the musical world to not seem like a novelty. Much as I loved the male-female harmony duets of bands like The Reivers, The Chills, Glass Eye, Yo La Tengo and Eleventh Dream Day, the vast majority of the bands I saw back then were all male.

In the midst of this scene, Liz Phair's music stood out. She didn't sound like your typical singer-songwriter, nor did she sound like the member of a collective or a band. The actual sound of her music was "indie," in that it was produced in a manner that couldn't be played on mainstream radio, despite using 4/4 time, major chords, electric guitar, and the cadences and instruments that the boys used. But unlike those other bands, she wrote about things I could relate to: room mates who are hard to live with, guys who are insincere, the struggle to figure out

what matters in life, and what it was like to feel voiceless and powerless in a nightclub, on a road trip, or during sexual intercourse.

Indeed, many of her questions called ideas about sexuality into question, for example, the complicated concept behind “Canary,” which grapples with the difficult emotions inherent in oral pleasure, the subjugation that it claims for itself (“I come when called”), the obedience it seems to promise to the giver, while asserting the truth that one’s autonomy is not, in fact, engaged by that particular act.

As the subject of that song indicates, *Exile in Guyville* was an apotheosis. It was a celebration of the troubling emotional quandaries that twenty-something women can get into in the realms of arty bohemian urban world of the mid-1990s music scene. It was not exactly about sex, although sex came into it. It was, so understandably, somewhat conflicted about its attitude towards the male species.

Yet for all its brilliance and singularity, *Exile in Guyville* was not a blockbuster album, by any means: as of 2010, it had sold fewer than 500,000 copies.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it was a polarizing one. For some listeners, mainly female ones, Liz was a champion of the long-missing feminine perspective in indie rock and for others she was a symbol of the wily machinations of a music industry looking for new trends and fodder to push on the masses: to

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<sup>6</sup> In 2010, *Billboard* reported it had sold 491,000 copies, but in 2013, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that it had sold only 467,000. Bear in mind that sales are different from shipments: it has gone gold because it has *shipped* 500,000.

them, she seemed unskilled at musicianship. She was characterized by them as, to others, “not a good guitar player”; an off-key singer, and trivial; a person who used her provocatively good looks and lyrics to cash in on the media’s constant quest for sexiness.

In other words, *Exile in Guyville* blew a hole in the indie rock world’s belief that its music was somehow not part of free market, and no one likes the bearer of bad news. That said, with the release of *Exile*, Liz Phair invented a new paracosm to replace an old and tired one: she ripped apart the idea of the indie rock scene as a place where women serviced the needs of men, by listening and understanding them, and turned it into a place where they were criticized. And she accomplished this in one fell swoop, not through the music or lyrics she wrote, but through a single provocatively posed cover shot, a few titillating quotes, the specific ethos of the label she recorded for, and, most of all, the title of her album, which referenced a record by The Rolling Stones, a band which could be blamed for male rockerworship in the first place.

That these four extremely tangential elements could bring Phair’s record more notoriety than record sales, and yet leave it wallowing in obscurity, says quite a bit more about Guyville and the world of indie rock than it does about Liz Phair as an artist. That is why, in the pages that follow, I hope to redress the collective sense that *Exile* was a quirky one-trick pony of a record, whose foul-mouthed maker had little else to give the world. Instead, it is my contention that this record rivals its forebearer *Exile on Main St.* in the beauty of its sonics and the perfect articulation of its artistic vision. But in

order to do that, I must first elaborate on the complex politics of early 1990s music scene, which were responsible not only for the reception of the record, but also for its content and form.

## Guvville as Ghostworld

According to a 2009 article by ethnomusicologists Vincent Novara and Stephen Henry in *Notes*, a scholarly journal, the term “indie rock” is actually British rather than American. They define it as a genre that sees itself as differing from the business practices and creative control operating at major labels, and which is characterized by a sound that includes “the careful balancing of pop accessibility with noise, playfulness in manipulating pop music formulae, sensitive lyrics masked by tonal abrasiveness and ironic posturing, a concern with ‘authenticity,’ and the cultivation of a ‘regular guy’ (or girl) image.”

Better (and longer) books have been written describing the genesis and devolution of that era. (See, for example, *Our Band Could Be Your Life* by Michael Azerrad.) It is not my purpose to rehearse that history here, but to put it in a nutshell. This was a scene that evolved from that of American punk via a series of city-centric independent record labels: Matador in New York, Twin/Tone in Minneapolis, Sub Pop in Seattle, and so on. The records made by artists on these labels were publicized outside the mainstream music system, mostly on college radio stations that eschewed major label fare for independently

owned and produced rock. These bands then toured the country playing a network of small clubs in towns where their records were sold in independent record stores, often in towns with liberal arts colleges, or cities with established music scenes. And, as noted above, one thing all these nodes in the network of indie rock generally had in common was that they championed a small-is-beautiful policy that forewent the clutches of corporate capitalism.

As is the case with anything outside of the latter, very little money exchanged hands in the process. The bands, the bars, the fanzines, the records stores, and the labels all eked out a small living, mostly for the pleasure of a select set of listeners. Probably the people who profited most on the scene (until Nirvana was signed to Warner Brothers and everything changed) were the bartenders or maybe the companies that produced the T-shirts. And I would argue that it was not in spite of, but *because* of that lack of profit, that this was kind of a utopian scene. But it was also doomed.

Mind you, this was before Etsy and CafePress and Tumblr and Spotify and Twitter: it was way back when dinosaurs, personified by Dinosaur Jr., ruled the earth. Hence, the only way to find out about something was to read about it, and that didn't mean Googling it, because Google didn't exist yet either. Also, if you wanted to hear what a band sounded like, there was no way of doing so except by, well, going out and hearing it. Sometimes you could convince someone else, like the local radio station, or a record store clerk who had an open copy, or your friend who prided himself on owning everything first, to play it for you. But usually you had to buy the thing

yourself, or go to see the band live. There was *no other way* to actually hear the music.

The result of this system was that the people who recommended things—label owners, college radio DJs, and fanzine writers—had to be relied on. The hapless consumer was dependent on them in order to hear new music. And inevitably, if one were a music lover, one was held in thrall to the gatekeepers, those with access to the records you couldn't afford to experiment with purchasing.

But enough said. If you're reading this book, you probably know all this already, and you definitely know how things ended: with a huge influx of much-fought-over cash, the appropriation of a sound, a gunshot wound to the head, and eventually (and rather unexpectedly) with the invention of two technologies: digital music files and peer-to-peer sharing, which together destroyed the base of the music industry, recreating it in a totally different image.

Twenty years is a long time. And music and cultural values aren't the only things that have changed considerably since 1993; technology has also shaped how we listen to and acquire music. It would be wrong to assess the world today without taking into account those changes: indeed, as Neil Postman once wrote, "New things require new words."<sup>7</sup> What he meant by that, he added, was that technology "imperiously commandeers our most important terminology ... it redefines freedom, truth, intelligence fact wisdom, memory, history—all the

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<sup>7</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. (New York: Knopf, 1992), 8.



words we live by.”<sup>8</sup> Since the invention of peer-to-peer file sharing, new technology has changed what we mean by those words and many others: the word friend, for example, and even music, now has a different connotation. It has especially altered the meaning of the words “ownership” and “independent,” and to my mind it has altered them for the better, since the internet allows for creation and dissemination on a scale that the indie rock world could not have dreamed of.

Another word new technology has affected is “authenticity.” In art and literature, authenticity used to be a term that implied authorship. It denoted that a single artist created a single piece of art. Walter Benjamin has famously explicated the idea of aura by deducing that what we value in a work of art is not only its aesthetic excellence and the world it conveys, but its singularity, its irreproducibility. But in the world of indie rock, “authenticity” has a slightly different valence. Since the advent of the folk rock revival, rock fans have added additional requirement to the definition of “authentic”: namely, that the artist is sincere about what he or she is singing. Moreover, whether the artist is a giant teased-hair transsexual or a mousy bespectacled midget, rock fans require that the artist be exactly who he or she says he or she is. Now, this is problematic, on a number of different levels. For example, is it necessary that a jazz interpreter like Billie Holiday or Etta James be a heroin addict? Need all rap singers be former dope dealers? Were Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Tom Petty the blue-collar workin’ men they sing as? Did The Rolling Stones ever

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 9.

have the blues? And if the answer to these questions is “no,” then what is so “authentic” about them?

In fact, none of those acts are or were *inauthentic*, except on the terms that rock music claims to be important. But no matter what terms one is talking about, there was never anything inauthentic about Liz Phair, either. Liz’s concerns were authentic to me and to others like me. Some of what she wrote about was simply general life experience. But other songs called out words about sex, and sex in the mouth of a woman is generally willfully misinterpreted (by men) as an erotic call to action. Phair’s album was lauded and criticized for its frankness about sexuality: songs that used swear words for female genitalia and told men just what positions she enjoyed having sex in were, not surprisingly, written about at length. But those songs were really only a small part of a larger work, just as having sex is usually just a small part of a person’s life. At the time, I was surprised at what a fuss people made about the swear words, and even more surprised at many of the even more sexist ways that Liz Phair was portrayed in the media, and even by people who knew her. It is true that she herself seemed to court photo sessions that played up how pretty she was, posing in sexualized ways that emphasized this aspect of her persona. But many people in the indie rock world seemed unable to rise above criticizing her for pandering to the masses. Many other women in indie rock—the aforementioned Kims, and some of the women in all-women bands like L7 and Bikini Kill—appeared not to care about their appearance (or at least not to care very much). To look unkempt, or unmade up, was more usual, and more accepted by indie rockers as “authentic.”

The criticism Liz Phair called down on herself opened my eyes to some things about indie rock world that I hadn't noticed before. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so surprised to find out that indie rock reflected the same kind of work-related gender inequalities that you might find in corporate America—for instance, that a glass ceiling existed at independent record labels, that women had less say in deciding what music belongs in the revered canon of right-rock, that women weren't respected as equals on stage, on the dance floor, or in music business workplaces, at least, not as respected as men. Yet I had somehow naively assumed that the indie rock scene, which in other ways had positioned itself as an alternative to the mainstream, was also an alternative to mainstream *values*: that it was liberal and progressive and unconventional and smart. But I was wrong. Even though the bespectacled indie rockers of Guyville weren't exactly calling women bitches and hos (as was happening all too frequently elsewhere in the culture at the time), there was nonetheless a systematic and very era-pervasive subjugation going on in subtle ways that Liz both captured and responded to on her record. The guys of Guyville rejected Liz Phair when her record became successful, but not before they had told her what it thought it was proper for her to think about music. That is why she named her record after *Exile on Main St.*, The Rolling Stones album that was something of a bible to most boys in the kinds of rock bands that were playing round Wicker Park.

Liz herself describes Guyville and its denizens thusly:

All the guys have short, cropped hair, John Lennon glasses, flannel shirts, unpretentiously worn, not as a

grunge statement. Work boots. It was a state of mind and/or neighborhood that I was living in. Guyville, because it was definitely their sensibilities that held the aesthetic, you know what I mean? It was sort of guy things—comic books with really disfigured, screwed-up people in them, this sort of like constant love of social aberration. You know what I mean? This kind of guy mentality, you know, where men are men and women are learning.<sup>9</sup>

Luckily, women learn fast. It's the fashion these days to dismiss Marxist theory as old-fashioned, jargon-ridden and a counterproductive method of understanding literature and culture, and it probably is all those things. But I still remember the most compelling sentence I read in graduate school: *Ideology represents not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the **imaginary** relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.*<sup>10</sup>

You know how people say the unexamined life is not worth living? That sentence, written by Louis Althusser in 1970 (but not read by me until thirty-five years later), was my first step in the process of doing that—the first moment wherein I began to see the conditions around me as they were, rather than as I thought they were. It was the blue pill in *The Matrix*, the key to my

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<sup>9</sup> Oocities, “Biography: Liz Phair.” <http://www.oocities.org/sunsetstrip/towers/8529/autobiography/exile.htm> (accessed January 2, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 162.

surroundings. Until I read it, I didn't realize that the ideologies I was steeped in—whether it was capitalism, consumerism, or the aesthetic purism and DIY rules that governed the indie rock world—don't describe the world as it is. They merely describe how we *wish* the world was.

Teresa de Lauritis has suggested that this crucial sentence by Althusser can also be applied to gender and the way we think about it. She suggests that what is often characterized as something fixed—i.e. “male” and “female”—is actually just our imaginary relationship to the real conditions of our existence. The technologies of gender, as de Lauritis reminds us, are embedded in everything around us: in the way we turn things on (or off), in the way we learn about the world, and in the media we watch and listen to. Gender, she says, is not so much a sexual difference as a mere *representation* of a social relationship, one that assigns meanings (and behaviors) along with identity, value, prestige, status, and kinship. It is, to paraphrase Fredric Jameson, “‘always already’ inscribed in the political consciousness of dominant cultural discourses and their underlying master narratives.”<sup>11</sup> To wit: “The representation of gender is a construction,” de Lauritis writes, “and in the simplest sense it can be said that all of Western Art and high culture is the engraving of the history of that construction.”<sup>12</sup> To take a simple example, those pictures

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<sup>11</sup> Jameson, F. *Postmodernism: The Political Unconscious, Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell Press, 1981, quoted in Teresa de Lauritis. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: (Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>12</sup> De Lauritis, *Technologies of Gender*, 3.

of Madonnas that riddle the churches of Europe have embedded a conception of motherhood in the minds of most Westerners that constructs the way that women have been perceived and treated throughout the ages.

No doubt. But if I were still in graduate school, and therefore under an obligation to unpack de Lauritis's blanket statement, I am sure that I would have queried it thusly: "Why only *high* art?" Because in my experience, low art is even more likely to be ruled by the dominant discourse of western culture—by social constructions of race, class, and most of all gender—by, not to put too fine a point on it, the white male meta-narrative that frames our understanding of race, class, and ideology.

Low art can illuminate aspects of our culture that are obscured elsewhere. For example, the 2001 film *Ghost World*, adapted from that lowest of lowly art forms, the comic book, by its writer Daniel Clowes, beautifully illustrates the constructed nature of gender relationships, particularly as they pertain to low art objects—in this case, vinyl records, old television shows, and advertisements, which the movie's protagonists collect. The main character seeks solace from the popular culture artifacts of a bygone era (the ghost world of the title) by dressing up in a previous era's fashions and by criticizing those who conform to societal norms. The culture and sensibility invoked (and critiqued) in *Ghost World* also has much in common with the world of *Exile in Guyville* and therefore is worth examining.

*Ghost World* was justly celebrated when it was released in 2001 as a teenage coming-of-age movie. Its female protagonist, Enid Cohn (played by Thora Birch), was likened to Holden Caulfield and Dustin Hoffman's

character in *The Graduate*. The late Roger Ebert said: “I’d like to hug this movie.”<sup>13</sup> But though all the critics who embraced it were quick to notice its disavowal of all that is phony and hypocritical in modern life, there are other lenses through which to view it. In addition to its other virtues, I think that *Ghost World* paints a useful portrait of the technologies of gender. In a word, *Ghost World* gives a portrait of Guyville, reminding us that it was not just a singular place inhabited by Liz Phair, but was a state of mind that permeated that entire era.

*Ghost World*, made Chicago native Terry Zweigoff, depict the technologies of gender at work. It is one of the few movies out there that completely evades the male gaze, staying firmly in Enid’s perspective from beginning to end. Yet at the same time, one of the many messages it has for viewers is that however much they may struggle against their fate, women are always constrained to play particular gender roles. One of the final pieces of music the now-miserable Enid listens to is a childish record called “A Smile and A Ribbon” by Prudence and Patience, which advocates that sad girls should smile through their tears.

One thing that makes *Ghost World* such an exquisite piece of work is that it shows that men and women can understand one another’s pain. Both the book and the film are man-made artifacts, but they are nonetheless female-centric, and the light they shed on the guys of Guyville is a harsh one. The men in this film are all portrayed as being gentle, passive losers, like Seymour, or else violent, racist, and obsessed with death. A seemingly nice young man who

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ghost-world-2001> (accessed January 3, 2014).

invites Enid and her best friend Becky to a gig has a band called “Alien Autopsy”; the loathsome video store clerks talk incessantly about methods of dismemberment; a male member of her art class is praised for drawing pictures of murders taken from his favorite video game, and so on. The film (like the graphic novel that is its source material) sympathizes wholly with Enid’s alienation from the mainstream world, and we see it through her eyes as being full of horrible, outsize vanities, completely unworthy of her attention. In sum, *Ghost World* describes the emotional motivations that lead people to reject mainstream culture, but also depicts the terrible sacrifice that choice entails.

Now, it might seem like comparing the men of *Ghost World* to those in *Guyville* is a stretch. But both texts are at bottom about female frustration with male judgment, and male taste. In *Ghost World*, the viewer gradually gathers that Enid’s own instincts and tastes are actually more natural and more unique—not to mention more rooted in the body—than those of Seymour and his male friends, who are obsessed with vinyl. They haunt record stores and swaps and exchange arcane information about old blues records and collectors’ items. For them, record collecting is a pastime that informs and explicates one’s values and beliefs; one’s taste in music is akin to one’s religious or political sentiments. Early in the film, Seymour tells Enid, “You think it’s healthy to obsessively collect things? You can’t connect with people, so you fill your life with stuff.” Over and over, the film emphasizes that Seymour’s obsession is with the *material* object of vinyl; by contrast, Enid cares for the content: the song itself.

Another parallel to the indie rock world of the 1990s is in the male characters’ attitudes towards the young



women protagonists. Throughout the film, Enid and her friend Becky are referred to by the men in the film to their faces as “cheerleaders” and “chicks”; although we, the viewers, know them both to be whip-smart, observant, and almost pathologically critical of the small errors in taste and judgment of those around them, they are, as humans, dismissed as a negligible presence by everyone they meet. Significantly, the only time Enid is able to get Seymour’s full attention—apart from the several times when she actually sneaks up behind him and shouts BOO in his ear—is by swearing. Every time she says something nasty—“pussy,” or “c\*\*t,”—he starts, and yelps, “Jesus!”

The parallel to *Exile in Guyville* is painfully obvious. *Guyville* was celebrated and castigated in every review of it for the blueness of its lyrics. Though it contains eighteen songs, those which specifically used curse words or sexual phrases stood out most to reviewers, who, like Seymour, jumped to attention at their utterance. And once their attention had been caught, the meaning behind their use began to stand out as well. These were not your ordinary F bombs: they were a contextually appropriate uses of the word. To my knowledge, no one has written to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) about it (probably because it never aired on a commercial station), but if anyone had, a close reading of recent FCC decisions on indecency rulings suggest that the Commission would deny the complaint.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> G. I. Belmas, G. D. Love, and B. G. Foy, “In the Dark: A Consumer Perspective on Broadcast Indecency Denials.” *Federal Communication Law Journal* 60.1 (2007), 67–109.

*Ghost World* evokes a forgotten moment, an era, a *Zeitgeist* if you will—perhaps even a *Jetzgeist*, if you'll forgive the asinine pedantry. (It was a moment characterized by mistimed and inappropriately deployed asinine pedantry in music writing, anyway.) It is set in the same era of *Exile in Guyville*. Sandwiched between the eras of punk rock and Napster, it was a time of incredible hope for a number of musicians, hope, and change, and brilliant fun, but it was also a deceptive time and a mean time, and an evanescent one. Today people look back and think it an era full of bold and witty musicians with integrity who made gritty, tuneful, roughhewn albums and who then travelled the country playing tiny clubs to warm little crowds of fans who hugged them afterwards in the afterglow of a big group consciousness. Them against the world. "Our little group has always been,"<sup>15</sup> you know. And it was. But it was also a time veiled with the false consciousness that often cloaks artistic pursuits that at bottom are making someone some money. And if there is one way that the indie rock era failed in its promise of communal, anti-capitalist utopia, it was in its attitude towards women fans. As Liz put it:

[Guyville guys] always dominated the stereo like it was their music. They'd talk about it, and I would just sit on the sidelines. Until finally, I just thought, "[screw] it. I'm gonna record my songs and kick their [butt]."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nirvana, "Smells Like Teen Spirit." *Nevermind*. Butch Vig, 1991. CD.

<sup>16</sup> Oocities, "Biography: Liz Phair." <http://www.oocities.org/sunsetstrip/towers/8529/autobiography/exile.htm> (accessed January 2, 2014).

As that image indicates, instead of embracing women, indie rock took its cues towards them from commercial rock, where the explicit exclusion of women audiences has been empirically documented. For example, Elizabeth Wollman's study "Men, Music and Marketing at Q104.3" illustrates the way that commercial radio stations of the 1990s, by using gender-specific tactics and appeals, "consciously oriented their programming solely towards male listeners while simultaneously ignoring female listeners."<sup>17</sup> Wollman quotes the kind of masculine rhetoric heard on stations like WAXQ (104.3) in New York City, such as commercials that confused the word "variety" with "vagina," which used the Primus track "Wynona's Big Brown Beaver" as their in-joke text, or that had a "win a girl" contest on which men ridiculed women every Wednesday night by posing questions about orgasms and breast size—the type of chit-chat made popular on the Howard Stern show every morning.

Stations like these, Wollman explains, did so because they explicitly courted the lucrative male audience demographics.

In the case of Q104.3 heavy metal guitar solos were used in advertisements to attract and hold the interest of young, male listeners. Backed by busy, complicated sounding guitar solos, announcers praised skis, car dealerships, the Internet, sporting goods, beer, local restaurants, and Q104.3 itself. The preponderance of heavy metal in advertisements also worked to connect, in the listener's

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth L. Wollman, "Men, Music, and Marketing at Q104.3 (WAXQ-FM New York)." *Popular Music and Society* 22.4 (1998), 2.

mind, the station, the products it advertised and the music that served as its cultural product.<sup>18</sup>

The station also simply didn't play music made by women. According to the station manager of Q104.3, this was not a market-driven decision, but because such music was "bad." "A lot of these modern women musicians just sound mad at the world—they're just filled with rage," a DJ told Wollman.

We don't want that on our [current, classic rock format]. We want a more upbeat, positive sound. The previous format ... played some women. They played Hole I think. But frankly, women just don't play stuff that rocks all that hard.<sup>19</sup>

Another station director, Razz, concurs:

I just don't think the musicianship was there. I think now, when you look at what's happening in the 1990s, you are starting to see better female bands, because of the musicianship, which is the most important thing so they're starting to get on bigger record labels. They're starting to—let's face it—act like some of the rock bands that are male.<sup>20</sup>

What's interesting about these comments—besides their specious implication that members of bands like Mötley

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Crüe are good musicians—is how closely they adhered to the indie rock aesthetic of the time, a place where I in my naivety thought things were different. An earlier generation’s warm welcome to musicians and singers like Patti Smith, Chrissie Hynde and The Raincoats had misled me into believing that gender wasn’t an issue in indie rock. Yet in fanzine pages and alternative press, indie rock writers praised the “musicianship” of acts like Big Black and ridiculed or stereotyped women in only slightly more subtle ways than those of commercial radio.

Into this world stepped Phair, a twenty-five-year-old from Chicago with a tape full of music that made fun of men. OK, it didn’t make fun of men *per se*—it merely shot holes in some of their pretensions. But even if you weren’t clear on her exact target, it was evident that she was taking ownership of a particularly male turf. Indeed, she claimed her work was a “response album” to The Rolling Stones opus *Exile on Main St.*. Track by track, she said, she wrote the same songs, only from a *girl’s point of view*. She told Rob Joyner:

What I did was go through [the Stones album] song by song. I took the same situation, placed myself in the question, and answered the question. “Rocks Off”—my answer to that is “Six Foot One.” It’s taking the part of the woman that Mick’s run into on the street. “Let it Loose”—okay, that’s about this woman who comes into the bar, she’s got some new guy on her arm, Mick was in love with her. He’s watching this guy, “eh, just wait, she’s gonna knock you down.” He’s talking, “let it loose,” as if to be like, babe, what the hell happened, talk to me. So

my answer was, “I want to be your ...” I put a song in there that lets it loose ... [All the lyrics on the album] either had to be the equivalent from a female point of view or it had to be an answer kind of admonishment, to let me tell you my side of the story.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, as good an origin story as this makes, another way of putting it was that Liz didn’t write an album about The Rolling Stones told from a girl’s point of view—she just wrote *an* album from a girl’s point of view. But that alone was novel enough to make the other claim seem plausible. True, there were songs on it called “Mesmerized” (a catch-word from “Rocks Off”) and “Flower” (which recalls “Dead Flowers”). Otherwise, it was hard for listeners to credit the claim. After all, Liz’s album contains no songs about heroin, and nothing remotely country, except some allusions to roadhouses. But the way she described her record really got people’s attention. Either it WAS a response to *Exile*, or it wasn’t, but either way, it described life as girls like her were living it—exiled in Guyville for the duration.

*Exile*’s fanbase wasn’t limited to women, just as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (or any other *Bildungsroman*) isn’t aimed exclusively at young men. But it did comment on male rock posturing, describing instead the world as it was lived by young women in their twenties. That it did so tunefully, poetically, and in the voice of a real young woman was perhaps not entirely unprecedented—Patti Smith did it years before, although Patti Smith was less

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<sup>21</sup> Oocities, “Biography: Liz Phair.” <http://www.oocities.org/sunsetstrip/towers/8529/autobiography/exile.htm> (accessed January 2, 2014).

a female singer and more of a one-of-a-kind human and a poet, and besides, she consistently portrayed herself as one of the boys, and/or as a boy's muse. By contrast, Liz was never one of the boys. Instead, she took ownership of the then-trendy indie rock idiom, which paid lip service to the idea of the inspired amateur with no musical background. Phair blithely borrowed the chords and tempos of Rolling Stones-inspired rock, and adapted it to her own language and needs.

In short, Phair was the indie rock equivalent of Frantz Fanon, exposing the state of a colonized people living under the subjugation of an outdated and tendentious ideology. By making her double record a cheeky mockery of The Rolling Stones' worshiped LP, she managed to dismantle the master's house by using the master's tools.

And the masters noticed. Before 1994 was out, Phair was quite literally run out of her hometown of Chicago. Later, she recalled walking into bars and overhearing debates about her hair, her singing, her talent, her provenance. Silence would fall upon her entrance: friends were furious with her for becoming successful.<sup>22</sup> In short, she underwent what would later be called a flame war, only (alas!) not in cyberspace. Although *Exile in Guyville* was celebrated as one of the year's top records by *Spin* and the *New York Times*, at the time of its release it was simultaneously massacred in the fanzine world by mainly male critics who accused her of being boring, inauthentic, and a poor musician. Most famously, Chicago-area record producer Steve Albini called it "a fucking chore to listen

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

to.” Later, her own producer Brad Wood called her “the most hated woman in Chicago.”<sup>23</sup>

To its credit, the larger rock critic world outside of Chicago embraced Liz Phair’s album almost instantly. But Phair’s reception was dimmed by what *Chicago Reader* pop critic Bill Wyman once called the “almost psychopathic rejection” by local rock fans in Chicago—a group obsessed by some notion of credibility and authenticity that seemed to be colored entirely by high school-type “in crowd” machinations of popularity and friendship. Soon after the release of *Exile*, the *Chicago Reader*, a thick, free, weekly newspaper, began to receive reams of mail joining in the hate-fest of Liz. Here, for example, is an excerpt from an outraged letter Wyman received at the *Reader* from Albini, who took great offense to Wyman’s assertion that *Exile* was one of three of the best LPs made by Chicagan bands in 1993. In it, Albini, who at the time fronted the band Big Black, asserts that the positive press Phair was receiving locally was bullshit:

Music press stooges like you tend to believe and repeat what other music press stooges write, reinforcing each other’s misconceptions as though the tiny little world you guys live in (imagine a world so small!) actually means something to us on the outside.

Out here in the world, we have to pay for our records, and we get taken advantage of by the music industry,

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<sup>23</sup> Steve Albini, “Three Pandering Sluts and Their Music Press Stooge.” *Chicago Reader Archive*. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/three-pandering-sluts-and-their-music-press-stooge/Content?oid=883689> (accessed January 2, 2014).



using stooges like you to manipulate us. We harbor a notion of music as a thing of value, and methodology as an equal, if not supreme component of an artist's aesthetic. You don't "get" it because you're supported by an industry that gains nothing when artists exist happily outside it, or when people buy records they like rather than the ones they're told to.

Though you wave your boob flag proudly throughout the rest of the piece, you did make one reasoned and intelligent statement. You stated your disapproval of those who would snicker at Liz Phair's personal life in lieu of actually discussing her merits as an artist and her album as a work. Considering how easy a target Phair's music is, it is a shame that some of her critics have nullified the discussion by using the leering mode you refer to ...

Albini's comment was mocked a bit by some readers who noted his unclear motives—as a member of a competitively placed indie rock band himself, he may have been hurt not to be included in the top ten list; as a producer who worked for major labels, his accusations against musicians taking label money were hard to fathom—but he was also supported by other readers, who wrote back:

Mr. Albini's typically vitriolic pontifications express a point that is well-targeted and long overdue. Obviously, these musicians know how to package themselves, possess considerable business acumen, and work very, very hard ...

Ms. Phair, the Brooke Shields of Indie-Pop, claims the biggest prize for playing the media like a Stradivarius months before her album actually came out ...

Steve articulated perfectly the frustration and disgust many of us have with Wyman and his propensity for promoting mediocre, completely unspectacular Chicago rock acts like Liz Phair ...

In short, at least in the small world of Chicago, Phair's record brought out the uglier side of the indie rock scene, in the process highlighting the way that women artists, both there and elsewhere in the popular music world, are often undervalued there as both listeners and consumers. This is a curious conundrum that haunts not just rock, but music itself. Somehow, female fandom is both valuable (in that it generates cash) and at the same time laughable, while female connoisseurship, female artistry, and female ownership is—as in so many other fields of practice—a lesser thing. And I believe this is not because the labels are administrated and the music machine itself is run by men (though it mostly is), but because the *music scene itself* is gendered. Indeed, it rests on what seems to be a fundamentally masculine impulse. We all know the stereotype, best illustrated in *The Simpsons* by Comic Book Guy, but research does support the impression that record collecting is a largely male practice: according to Roy Shuker's book *Record Collecting as a Social Practice*, lists of active record collectors on websites and subscribers to mailing lists and specialty magazines like *Record Collector* are a whopping ninety-five per cent male.<sup>24</sup> And Shuker's findings are not surprising. Communications scholar Will Straw

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<sup>24</sup> Roy Shuker, *Wax Trax and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as a Social Practice*. (London: Ashgate, 2010), 34.

also notes that record collecting is “a male-dominated, homosocial environment that is characterized by a slavish devotion to shared, specialized knowledge and the careful guarding of that knowledge to defend against the encroachment of outsiders.”<sup>25</sup> In some ways, however, the point of this guardianship is totally unclear, except in that it goes against the normal standards of capitalism. Capitalism, as its name implies, values the accruing of *capital* and in the case of record collectors, this means of records. Because records are mass produced and cheaply made, for a collection to have value, the owners need to assign a special exchange value to each disk, one that doesn’t rely on rarity. Thus, the collector draws lines in the sand that add or subtract value to the records owned.

That record collectors have evolved a way to give their collections more value makes sound economic sense. What’s more puzzling is their simultaneous critique of capitalism itself. As Albini’s letter makes plain, such fans simultaneously like to believe that their favorite acts are being discriminated against by critics who don’t understand or appreciate them, but also like to believe that becoming successful—being appreciated by the masses—is a kind of a crime that devalues the music and the artist (and, of course, their collection of capital) by diluting it. Lynn Hirschberg once described this position in a *New York* feature on Matador Records owner Gerard Cosloy. In the piece, Cosloy says, “[in the indie world]

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<sup>25</sup> W. Straw, ‘Sizing Up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture.’ In Sheila Whiteley (ed.), *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3–16.

being a jerk validates you—it means you don’t care about anything else—except, of course, the music.”<sup>26</sup>

To me, it is still unclear, however, why so many in the indie rock world so disliked Liz Phair’s perspective, and why, having decided to dislike it, it also made them so angry. The same set of people could dislike other bands with far less vitriol. Nor did her gender alone seem to be the deciding factor, since presumably most of these people like, or at least don’t loathe, women as a class of people. Albini, for example, has produced the records of several highly regarded female bands and artists, including The Breeders and P. J. Harvey. And yet, there was a pervasive sense in the 1990s that, with a few notable exceptions (namely, The Breeders and P. J. Harvey), women, while welcome to participate in the indie rock scene, were only supposed to do so in a limited capacity. Acceptable roles included being fans or girlfriends of the boys in the bands, in which case their job was to support those bands quite literally—with their day jobs. They could work in a record store or at a record label as a publicist, marketing the indie rock to other fans, or they could own or run the nightclubs in which the bands played. They could also be in the bands, but this was by far the rarest place to find them. In all of these roles, women were absolutely crucial to the economy of indie rock; you could even argue more crucial than the men. Yet as a rule, the less-visible women who populated this scene were still hesitant about expressing their opinions about the music in question, because doing so was to

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<sup>26</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, “Gerard Cosloy is Hipper Than You.” *New York*, May 8, 1995, 8.19, 61.

court an almost dangerous level of hostility. In 1999,<sup>27</sup> Kembrew McLeod, now a professor of communications at the University of Iowa, undertook a scholarly analysis of the gendered nature of rock criticism. McLeod looked at the *Village Voice*'s Pazz & Jop poll winners and contributors from 1971 to 1999, and pointed out that at its MOST inclusive—in 1991—only fifteen per cent of its respondents were women. This gender imbalance was reflected in which artists were celebrated. McLeod points out that of the fourteen artists who occupied the elite category of appearing in the poll's top ten on four or more occasions—Dylan, Springsteen, etc.—none are women. Liz Phair, who won the poll in 1993, was only the second woman ever to do so, after Joni Mitchell in 1974.<sup>28</sup>

As McLeod says, “The gendered nature of rock criticism goes further than just the identity of who makes the music and who critiques it (though this in itself is instructive).” In his analysis, McLeod identified five traits that the (mostly male) critics valorized as attributes of good or great rock music. These were originality, authenticity, rawness, sophistication, and sincerity. Many of these traits were described in words that correlated with attributes normally associated with the male gender. Rawness, for instance, was often described as music that

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<sup>27</sup> Prior to the dismantling of the old-school system of music journalism brought on by changes in media distribution, i.e. iPods, blogs, Napster, Pitchfork, etc.

<sup>28</sup> Kembrew McLeod, “Exile in Criticville: Liz Phair, Rock Criticism and the Construction of a ‘Do Me’ Feminist Icon.” Unpublished manuscript, later rewritten into his “One and a Half Stars.” *Popular Music and Society* 12. 1 (2001), 46–60.

had “primitive,” “stark,” “savage,” or “brutal” qualities, while equally male-centric words like “angst,” “anger,” and “aggression” were often appended to the other traits in a positive manner. By contrast, “bad” music—which McLeod defined as popular music which charted but didn’t poll—was music that critics deemed “inauthentic,” and it was often described with words that have feminine overtones, such as “saccharine,” “vapid,” “banal,” and “slick,” slick being the negative side of the word “sophisticated,” which only applies to “good” music.

As McLeod’s analysis reminds us, according to the collected rock critics of the world, the very worst word that could be applied to music is “manufactured,” which, with its Marxist overtones and misty implication of false consciousness, deserves an entire rhetorical analysis to itself. All electrified rock music made in music studios and then pressed on to vinyl or plastic to be played on electronic stereo equipment is in fact *manufactured*. But when the term is applied to a band or act, it signifies that the act is not responsible for its own sound. At least, such was the case in the 1990s, when the word “manufactured” was anathema. Today, the word is less derogatory. It describes the sound of everyone from Taylor Swift to Lil Wayne, but in a far less derogatory manner: it no longer has the sting it once did. Taylor Swift is able to make millions off her manufactured-sounding music, something Veruca Salt could never do, in part because in the new age of technology “manufactured” is considered a positive trait.

Be that as it may, even the most severe critic of Phair’s music couldn’t use any of those words to describe it. Indeed, Albini’s texts go to great lengths to *evade*

describing it, perhaps because the words he normally might have used to describe what he would consider bad—i.e. manufactured—rock didn't apply. So, instead of dealing with her musical style, which, with its simple chords and lo-fi production values, actually conformed to a lot of indie rock of the time, he calls her a "pandering slut." That's an extreme position, yet as McLeod points out, even those who praised Phair's music did so in a gendered manner, "as when *Billboard* reporter Timothy White ... describes Phair's song "Flower" as a "bare-mattress offertory ... that makes Prince's dirty mind seem like a prelate's Mass missal," or Jeff Giles wrote in *Newsweek*, "'Flower' [is] so explicit as to defy paraphrase, except to say the narrator has an oral fixation," or *Spin* writer Craig Marks (1994, 28), observes, "she knows how to talk dirty—as in, 'I'll fuck you till your dick is blue' from 'Flower', or 'I'm a real cunt in spring.'"<sup>29</sup> McLeod's point is that these X-rated quotes don't nearly do justice to the overall tenor or meaning of her album in its entirety; rather, they merely capture the attention of male readers.

At the same time, *Exile* was embraced by feminists who were busy reinventing that term to include the ideal of female sexual agency—what another writer at the time termed "do-me" feminism, a concept of empowerment that was prevalent in other texts by Susan Faludi (*Backlash*), Naomi Wolf (*The Beauty Myth*), Katie Roiphe, and others. But these descriptions also saw men attempting to take ownership of that position as well—that is, to recast the idea of women in control of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

their own pleasure to mean slutty women who like it doggy style. Indeed, the majority of the press about the record, though overwhelmingly positive, was simultaneously belittling and dismissive in exactly the way that male discourse *is* belittling and dismissive—that is to say, so unwittingly, so charmingly, so that the men don’t even notice they’re doing it. A good example as any can be found in *Esquire*’s December 1993 feature story, written by Mark Jacobson:

Liz Phair just wants you to be as smart as she is, able to spot a Monet or two when you walk through the Chicago Art Institute, and, when she’s in the mood, she’ll be your “blow-job queen.” With *Exile in Guyville* (Matador), Phair qualifies as an ultracool bawdy girl for the 1990s. In “Flower,” her seeming-jailbait protagonist declares, in a bad-seed singsong, “Every time I see your face, I get all wet between my legs,” detailing how she wants to “fuck you like a dog, take you home and make you like it ... with Liz, a smart, fun girl likely given to psychopharmacologically treatable mood swings, it’s all subtext, and that’s smartsex, funsex, sexsex.”<sup>30</sup>

Granted, Phair deliberately presented herself as a sexual being—as does, say, Rod Stewart. But Liz was also something more than that. Of the eighteen songs on *Exile*, only one, “Flower,” was what the magazines called dirty; “Fuck and Run,” despite its censorable title, was

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<sup>30</sup> Jacobson, Mark. “Women We Love.” *Esquire* 120.6 (December 1993), 43.



the opposite, the tale of a girl upset at the mindless promiscuity of men.

The rest of the album describes a life that is very much *not* centered on sex or marriage, but on life as it's lived in your twenties. Therefore, all we can conclude from this analysis of how Phair's work was covered is that men and women have different ways of decoding music; moreover, that when it comes to consumption of music, men and women have different listening schema. Unfortunately, there are no statistics that break down record sales by gender, so the only empirical evidence we have that listening and consumption are gendered is the evidence on the records themselves.

## Sonic Pleasure and Narrative Rock Criticism

Recently, a Facebook application appeared asking users to mark how many of a pre-selected “100 Most Influential Albums” they owned. “Few people have over 70!” the app declared. “See how many are in your collection.” It sounded kind of phishy to me, akin to the “teen swag” apps that get them to click or share, but it was expertly worded such that a number of my friends responded and their results then started to clog up my timeline. Somehow it didn’t surprise me to find out that my male friends, many of whom are either band members, rock critics, or intense rock fans, generally scored in the 90–95 range, while my female friends—also rock critics and fans—scored well under 50—often only about 18 or 20.

Now, I’d be the first to admit that my Facebook friends are not necessarily a harbinger of all things rock ‘n’ roll, but over forty of them answered the quiz, and the results were quite definite: the men had many of these records; the ladies did not. This could mean one of two things. Either my male friends buy more records than my female ones, or my female friends don’t like the

so-called influential records. Actually, both those things could easily be true.

But there is a third option: what this app counted as “influential” was a relatively randomly chosen group of records that didn’t really represent “influentialness.” And this is what turned out to be the case. I had assumed that the list would contain the usual suspects—the ones on the *Rolling Stone* “100 Most” list: Rolling Stones, Dylan, Velvet Underground, etc. In fact, it contained those records, and other equally predictable entries by The Beach Boys, Brian Eno, Sonic Youth, Lou Reed, Joy Division, Big Star, Tim Buckley, Captain Beefheart, The Ramones, and Wire. It also had a suspicious preponderance of British stuff from the 1990s—Super Furry Animals, Ride, Blur, Mercury Rev, Spiritualized, and The Wedding Present.<sup>31</sup> It had a couple of Australian acts (AC/DC, The Go-Betweens), no one from New Zealand, and very few women. Liz Phair was, of course, not on this list. But then neither was P. J. Harvey, and since the list was obviously generated in Britain, that seemed like a bigger omission.

Upon reflection, it seemed clear that the so-called influential albums app was just cleverly worded grist for the click-through mill, at best a parlor game for bored old vinylistas. And yet, the app wasn’t entirely meaningless, for the survey’s contents and its results highlight the fact that listening to rock (and answering surveys) is a gendered behavior. It did so informally; the correlations were mine alone. But nevertheless, it made a point in

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<sup>31</sup> Albums by all of these acts, except Tim Buckley, are covered in this series. There is one on Jeff Buckley, his son, as well.

ways that thus far academic research has been unable to capture. Indeed, although studies over the years have confirmed that listening practices around popular music differ on gender lines, they tend to confirm only that, overall, women are slightly more interested in popular music than men. More subtle distinctions of taste are hard to quantify in media effects research. Rather than qualifying the nuances of listening preferences, most social science inquiries into the development and effects of musical taste preferences focus only age and economic class status as indices. Uses and gratification research is fairly vague in its findings. For example, a 1978 study by Walter Gantz on college students showed that listeners use music to relieve boredom, ease tension, manipulate their mood, and fight loneliness.<sup>32</sup> In terms of gender, however, only a few major distinctions emerge. According to Gantz, twice as many girls marked “It’s good to dance to” as did boys as a reason to like a song, while slightly fewer girls chose “I want to listen to the words.” Love, as a topic, has a rainbow effect on such studies: it is too varied in context to evaluate. A similar study undertaken in 1991 by Ernest Hakanen and Alan Wells found the same thing: music is a powerful emotional tool, and women were slightly more likely to use music for “mood management.”<sup>33</sup> Overall, when it comes to listening to

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<sup>32</sup> Walter Gantz, Howard Gartenberg, Martin Pearson, and Seth Schiller. “Gratifications and Expectations Associated with Pop Music among Adolescents.” *Popular Music and Society* 6.1 (1978): 81–9.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Hakanen and Alan Wells. “The Emotional Use of Popular Music by Adolescents.” *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly* 68.3 (September 1991), 445–54.

rock, research indicates that women tend to choose songs that express happiness, hope, passion, and grief slightly more than men, who are more likely to choose songs that evince excitement, delight, anger, and hate. But these are vague categories, and like many social science projects seem inadequately framed with improper definitions. The mood that “Gimme Shelter” evokes in your breast when you hear it may depend on where you heard it first. And is it a song about hate, happiness, or excitement? None of these studies get at the heart of the debate: that is, they don’t really show how or why gender differences exist in patterns of consumption. In fact, such studies only show the futility of studying music listening practices through qualitative methodologies. Ethnographic tools might be more useful, and if one had observed the listening practices of men and women of Guyville, what one might have concluded is that though listening itself may not be a gendered practice, music consumption most definitely is.

Another methodology one might use to measure listening is critical theory, particularly film theory and psychoanalysis. Indeed, the very question “Is listening a gendered practice?” brings to mind Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking article on watching film, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”<sup>34</sup> According to Mulvey, watching movies is pleasurable because it codes “the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order.” Visual pleasure, she writes, is always scopophilic (because it invokes the thrill of watching) and narcissistic (invoking

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<sup>34</sup> Laura Mulvey. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16. 3, 1975): 6–18.

the thrill of being watched). It is erotic because the stories it tells are structured in part by the way it places the image of women at the center of its narratives.

Although Mulvey's text is now rather dated, her great insight—that the camera's gaze is male—still stands. According to Mulvey, a woman's role in a mainstream film is twofold: "to be simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote "to-be looked-at-ness."<sup>35</sup> This is true even if the eye behind the camera is female, as with Sofia Coppola's opening shot of Scarlett Johansson in *Lost in Translation*, the camera raking her near-naked body as time stands still. It is true whenever it implies the sexualization of essentially unsexualized characters, as with Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* series. And it is true even when the content of the gaze is homoerotic, as in the presentation of James Bond's body in *Casino Royale* and *Skyfall* ... because the camera's gaze is always male, but it isn't always heterosexual.

As these examples show, the list of the ways that films are structured by a worldview that privileges a masculine perspective is endless. Indeed, an entire feminist media studies canon has been developed from this essay, and although Mulvey's insights are easy to critique, their description of the technologies that shape narrative pleasure in film still ring true. The camera's gaze is male, and its male perspective now provides a pleasurable experience to both males and female viewers, but what about its ear? Is sonic pleasure voyeuristic and erotic,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 18.

and is it structured in a way that translates the language of the dominant patriarchal order?

I think it is fair to say that it is, at least in indie rock. Like film, from its outset, rock 'n' roll was produced primarily by men. No matter that its product—singles sung and performed by both men and women—were aimed at audiences of any gender: as with film, it is the narratives within the music—and the narratives that undercut the artist's identity and the way that identity appears to listeners—that are structured and dictated by male fantasies, male tastes, male skills, and male desires. Women artists may be reacting to men as predators or as victims, but they are seldom the instigators of the actual standards that are applauded within its genres.

Of course there are exceptions. Patti Smith, for one, has influenced the way popular music is listened to and practiced. But the vast majority of musics and styles conform to a particular set of narratives that were derived long ago from male tastes. Folk music and country have a slightly different history, but the world of hard rock and punk and rap produces a subject that conforms to the male patriarchy. With a few notable (and sadly obscure) exceptions, the men rock out, the women either listen to them rocking out, or sing about being rocked out to, or act, themselves, like men rocking out. Moreover, indie rock is structured in ways that never waver in their allegiance to a particular canon of artists who have been deemed authentic. Those who exist outside of the canon—and other types of popular music pleasures, such as dressing up like the star you worship and screaming out your love—are usually deemed artificial; lacking in authenticity.

To me, those actions are authentic, but that is not how it is characterized in the heteronormative world of criticism. By contrast, in a world that privileges the practice of record collecting as the most authentic way to experience music, the best measure of authenticity is rarity, because rarity is often connected to obscurity, and obscurity means that the artist was not embraced by the masses. Indeed, the zenith of the field of collecting is to embrace an artist or group who is acknowledged to be a genius, but who sold very few records: Green, Big Star, Hüsker Dü, and so on. That's why one of rock criticism's three governing principles is "The first Velvet Underground record only sold 30,000 copies, but everyone who bought it went out and formed a band." (The other two are "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture" and "The reason rock critics love Elvis Costello is because they all look like him.")<sup>36</sup>

One way that this masculine "ear" has persisted is via the language and rhetoric about music that are wielded in the press, through the *doxa* of rock criticism. From the start of the genre, the non-masculine point of view about music has been not so much elided as foreclosed on: the female perspective (such as it is) must conform to the *doxa*, or be ignored. The *doxa* evolved over time out of particular historical contingencies, specifically the folk rock revival of the early 1960s, whence Bob Dylan emerged. Bob Dylan's music is poetic and literate, therefore ripe for literary analysis; not surprisingly, it featured heavily in the first serious rock writing. So

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<sup>36</sup> The first quote is credited to Brian Eno, the second to Nick Lowe, and the third to David Lee Roth.



too did virtuosos like Jimi Hendrix and Santana, as did music that either sonically or emotionally referenced recent political struggles. The focus of the earliest serious rock writing—that is, writing that appeared in serious-minded journals rather than in fanzines marketed to teenagers—was inevitably linked to these three trends of folk music, politics, and poetics, and it was also produced and distributed by an almost wholly male industry. There were few, if any, female producers at the time, nor were female label owners a common thing. And in those early days of *Rolling Stone*, the writers were all male. Robin Green’s groundbreaking article on David Cassidy, which ran in *Rolling Stone* in 1972, helped change the paradigm, but the transition was slow. (The article, entitled “Naked Lunch Box,” depicted the much maligned Mr. Cassidy as a serious musician—and human being—something *Rolling Stone*’s male writers may have been loathe to do.) In 1972, Robin Green’s article in *Rolling Stone* on David Cassidy, “Naked Lunch Box,” changed that paradigm.

Given that pop music at that time was divided into “authentic” bands or singer-songwriters and corporately churned-out pop confections of the Brill Building, one can hardly blame the serious, articulate, collegiate types for developing a canon that placed a huge emphasis on authenticity, individuality, and poeticism over looks, style, and melody. And yet, it is interesting just how quickly the hard-and-fast criteria for “good” and “bad” music began to evolve. From The Velvet Underground’s seedy chronicles of New York City life to The Beach Boys’ far-different lavish and orchestral descriptions of the sadness embedded in an unearthly American paradise, a particular set of sounds and experiences began

to inform every rock writer's concept of what "good" popular music was. These sounds and experiences were inevitably linked to the writer's own romantic views of white male experience: after all, as Oscar Wilde once said, "all criticism is a form of autobiography."

In the days before MTV, which began in 1981, *Rolling Stone* was truly the gold standard of all writing about rock. Even if you didn't care for its choices, it set the agenda for everything because of its wide reach. But the advent of punk rock and the era of the music video caused a gradual sea change in style—if not, alas, in other aspects of what counted as "sonic pleasure." Thanks to punk rock's DIY aesthetic, in the early to mid-1980s a number of punk rock fans began to write DIY fanzines. These may have looked similar to *Crawdaddy*, but their tone was very different, crafted in part in reaction to the staid elderly tone and counter-culturally derived values of *Rolling Stone*, and in part by guys whose literary heroes were writers like Jack Kerouac, Lester Bangs, Charles Bukowski, and John Kennedy Toole.

Fanzine writers (who were mostly teenagers) swaggered and bragged and most of all made quips—quips that were often at the expense of bands, or people in bands, who did not celebrate the same things they did. They relied on a vast knowledge of a particular set of records, beginning with blues records, continuing on through a small segment of jazz and rockabilly, setting down lightly among psychedelic music, and then flitting off to glam, punk, and no wave, and ending up with an encyclopedic memory for single songs on 7-inches by bands that would never release anything again.

The result was that the amount of insider knowledge you needed to decipher any of these missives almost defies belief. Moreover, it was not a form that supported a large a presence of women, either as artists or writers. When they did make a fleeting appearance—usually as the subjects of reviews—the word choices and images used were not necessarily nasty, but certainly read as intrinsically dismissive.

Here, for example, is Tim Albourn writing in 1986 in his *Incite!* fanzine about the band the Jesse Garon and the Desperadoes:

Remember when Salem 66 put out “Across the Sea” and how warm it made you feel inside and how hilarious it was when Vogue (porn for broads) zine reviewed it? Well this single provides exactly the same feeling, except where Salem 66 rolled over and got laid, Jesse Garon kicks in with the chimey guitars that leave me breathlessly waiting for more.<sup>37</sup>

I listened to this record after writing this, and I have to say I absolutely loved it: sonically, this heretofore-unknown (to me) Scottish band summed up everything I loved about the late 1980s indie scene. Nonetheless, in a scant sixty-two kindly words, Albourn’s review demonstrates the type of gender narratives and in-reference obscurities that ran through the ’zine scene at this time. To wit: Salem 66 was a mixed-gender band from

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<sup>37</sup> *Incite!* 3, (Spring 1987), Old issues of *Incite!* can be found archived online: <http://www.lehman.edu/academics/arts-humanities/albourn/3.php#iii4>

Boston, so the review is implying that Jesse Garon and the Desperadoes is also mixed gender. (They are, but from the UK.) However, the word “broads” is belittling to women, and describing Salem 66’s sound as “getting laid” is more so. Somehow the word “porn” makes it into the review, sexualizing a remark that doubles as the requisite fanzine put down of mainstream (i.e. not DIY) culture. And Albourn’s fanzine wasn’t even on the radar of offensiveness. It is merely a nicely archived example of the counterculture of indie rock, giving us a brief glimpse into the vernacular of the time. As Steven Burt of the *London Review of Books* recently wrote (specifically about Incite!):

Fanzines were a kind of reviewing, but they were also letters to strangers, distinguished by informality and sincerity, by enthusiasm and relative brevity, and by the anti-elite attitude of punk rock, even when the individual zine writers favoured far softer sounds. Sometimes strangers wrote back, and sent their own zines, or became contributors to Albourn’s.<sup>38</sup>

Burt goes on to praise fanzines for their insularity—perhaps for their paracosmic-ness, though he doesn’t use the word. However, to my mind, fanzines like *Incite!* cannot to be dismissed as meaningless footnotes in a bygone scene because one way or another they had a substantial material effect on the music industry. Thanks

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Burt, *London Review of Books* weblog post, May 11, 2012. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2012/05/11/stephen-burt/incite/> (accessed June 1, 2013).

to YouTube, I was able to conjure up Jesse Garon's two-decade-old work instantly, but back in the day, to hear Salem 66 after reading about the band in *Incite!* would have required a substantial investment of time and money.

And as the writer notes, fanzines engendered a particular social world, one that had its charms, despite its problematic politics. It was a fairly hermetic world, but nonetheless, their economic effect on indie rock can't be overstated. Along with college radio stations (whence many of these fanzines emanated), these small press, limited-run, self-made booklets served a crucial function in the burgeoning indie scene, fostering a community of like-minded indie rock fans across the country, helping bands tour and labels to promote records that would never otherwise have received any notice. Subsequently, the best known of these 'zines, like the radio stations and the indie labels, became farm teams for bigger media outlets, training future *Spin* writers and future MTV execs, and future A&R men (artist and repertoire, i.e. talent scouts) for Geffen and Elektra and Warner. Their aesthetic was also the stated inspiration for the two Canadians who went on to found VICE Media, which currently, among other things, provides original content on HBO, YouTube, and other worldwide ventures.

But not all fanzines were polemical or mean; some (like *Incite!*) just were smudgy missives from manic young writers who wanted to champion what they loved. Nevertheless, for a short time, certain strains of them were responsible for a distinctive voice and attitude that colored the indie rock scene. Later on, the sensibility,

the in-jokes, and the brutal things that passed for wit in them reappeared on the internet in the guise of trolls and flame wars. In the anonymous posts and comments on YouTube, I recognized the fanzine writer voice instantly, especially the voice of the leading fanzines like *Forced Exposure* and *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll*. As gallerist, writer, and teacher Johan Kugelberg puts it in the book *We Never Learn: The Gunk Punk Undergut*:

In retrospect, it's stunning how awful *Forced Exposure* was, and how absolutely marinated it was in this high pitched whine of the spoiled elitist man-child. I think now, as a grownup, that *Forced Exposure* was the worst of all those magazines, just because of its crypto fascist elitist stance toward art. And because the bullying was so severe.<sup>39</sup>

*Forced Exposure* was just one of many opinionated fanzines that doled out coolness to a handful of bands on a handful of labels. Another equally influential fanzine, *Conflict*, was written by Gerard Cosloy, who went on to run Homestead, and later Matador Records. (In 1992, he signed Liz Phair on the basis of her *Girlysound* cassette, in a joint deal with Atlantic Records.) There were many other fanzines, and altogether, the genre crafted a distinctive style of snark and burn that characterized the

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<sup>39</sup> Eric Davidson, *We Never Learn: The Gunk Punk Undergut 1988–2001*. (New York: Backbeat.com, 2010), n.p. Kugelberg's opinion here seems more germane than my own, as he wrote for the fanzine before quitting punk rock and becoming an art gallery curator. Forced Exposure's Byron Coley, allowed to reply to this charge in the same page of the same book, merely says yes, he was elitist, and only mean spirited "to those that deserved it."

indie rock scene for years and years to come. Its most noticeable presence was in *Spin* magazine, which began in 1985 and was funded and edited by Bob Guccione, Jr., the son of *Penthouse* founder Bob Guccione. *Spin* was more mainstream than a fanzine, but its writers were culled from fanzines and echoed their tone. For example, the review of *Exile in Guyville* which it ran in April of 1993 (inside an issue with a cover depicting a top-free Evan Dando literally shoving his tongue into the mouth of a pretty girl), began with the words, “Liz Phair is a well-off Winnetka, Illinois brat,” and followed with even more snide dismissal of her as an artist.<sup>40</sup> The review states the album is simply a list of “songs about men who fucked her over” with “glaringly inconsistent lyrics [that] make Phair sound like a Freudian wet dream.” The review was written by a Peter Margasak, the proprietor of a *Forced Exposure*-like fanzine entitled *Butt Rag*, which championed nonmainstream punk and jazz rather than pop.

When all is said and done, the fact that *Guyville* did end up eventually getting its fair shakes in the pages of *Spin* speaks to its underlying greatness, especially since by music industry standards it didn’t sell a huge number of copies (well under a half million in its first decade), and had almost no radio airplay in an era when that was the only way a record got heard. Yet despite that, in some ways it feels like it was the first hit of the digital age, despite preceding the invention of Napster et al., because its success depended not on the normative channels of record promotion but on

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<sup>40</sup> *Spin* (April 1993), 97.

a social network—in this case, the one that swirled around the indie label scene. Indeed, much of the success and notoriety of *Exile in Guyville* was due to the fact that it was released on Matador Records, a label beloved by fanzine writers and indie rock fans with a very long list of indie rock favorites on its roster. Had it been released on a major label, it would have had a completely different audience. It also might not have been listened to as carefully: as label owner Gerard Cosloy remarked to me in an e-mail, the Matador constituency was one that included a large number of people who would appreciate and gravitate to an artist like Phair, based on her artistic merits—although, he adds, the same constituency also contained “probably a healthy percentage who’d be quick to reject her just as fast. Those camps weren’t broken down along gender lines, etc. Liz certainly had some very keen dude fans—and some rather vocal female detractors.”<sup>41</sup>

In Cosloy’s opinion, the wave of disdain that hit Phair in Chicago after the record’s release was probably unavoidable. “The backlash seemed like a by-product of a number of things,” he adds:

including but not limited to whether or not Liz had paid her dues, whether or not she was a credible musician (certainly there were people who thought she was a Brad Wood creation—Brad’s talented, but not to that extent!), etc. People naturally bristle at anything that seems overhyped. I don’t think Matador itself was “Guyville,” but certainly within the city of Chicago there was some resentment, criticism, etc. of Liz.

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<sup>41</sup> Gerard Cosloy in an e-mail, June 24, 2013.



That resentment, or perhaps one may more fairly call it that sensibility, comes out clearly in Margasak's *Spin* review. The Chicago scene in particular prided itself on its insularity and lack of commerciality. It was a scene populated by amateur musicians or amateur critics, and surely, looking back at issues of these magazines with hindsight, their completely male-centric viewpoint is not only glaring—it's absurd. Indeed, some of the earlier issues of *Spin* (like the Dando cover) have the same jarring effect as seeing 1950s advertisements for cigarettes or lingerie or cleaning products that feature babies smoking or women vacuuming in their bras.

The conclusion one takes away from glimpsing backwards is that in the 90s world of indie rock, sonic pleasure mimics visual pleasure and the microphone is always male. It looks male, and the sounds that come out of it are engineered to please the male, whether by conforming sonically to the codes that read as "good" in indie rock, or simply by providing him with something to gaze upon. In a snippet of an interview that ran in a *New York* magazine umbrella story on women in rock in 1996, Phair herself commented on the way that women fans at rock concerts may be presenting themselves as the subject of the male gaze, saying, "You go to the rock show because you want the guy to stare at you. You want to be singled out as an object." Phair goes on to suggest that the presence of women (like herself) on stage was changing the paradigm, but it seems more likely that more women on stage just means more male gazing—a process abetted by the journalism establishment: In the photo accompanying the article, Phair is portrayed as

sultry and disheveled, under the caption “Post grad porn: Phair talks dirty and smart.”<sup>42</sup>

From which we may extrapolate that, even if listening isn’t gendered, reading and, more trenchantly, writing about it *is*. Earlier, I suggested that sociological methodologies were an inconclusive way to get at gender disparities in music consumption because listening practices were far too individual to be parsed by qualitative studies. What I present here is a qualitative analysis of how **one** woman—Liz Phair—listened to **one** record, *Exile on Main St.*, in order to see how *for her* listening was a gendered practice.

A single subject study may at first seem rather limited, but I believe that, because listening is such a personal and individuated experience, it may be the only way to illuminate the ways that listening to music actually is a gendered practice, as well as why that matters. What follows is exactly that: a deeply personal—and deeply gendered—narrative about listening to a record from inside of guyville, looking out.

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<sup>42</sup> Kim France, “Feminism Amplified.” *New York*, June 3, 1995, 40.

## My Mixed Feelings

For some reason, it's considered sort of old school and embarrassing to refer to the enormous earning gap between the sexes that permeates the music business. I guess it seems like stating the obvious, or not accepting the normative nature of things, or simply not having a sense of humor. That is why, from the outset, Liz Phair's comparison of her own work to that of The Rolling Stones (via the title of her debut album) was an inherently audacious act. It was bold, and it was also witty, because of the vast and inescapable disparity in power between the two entities. Indeed, few things are more unequal than the rift between the earnings of an indie rock artist and The Rolling Stones, and that rift gets multiplied when the artist is female.

It's not just earning potential that differs between the genders in the music industry, either: the number of women actually taking part in it differs as well. Women don't participate much in the manufacturing side of music, compared to men, nor are there quite as many female musicians in the top echelons. One may deny that the music industry is sexist in the sense that women who take part in it are choosing to do so, but one can't dispute

that, within its doors, women are not the generators of nearly as much money as men. The chart (Page 68) of the top thirty-five earners of 2002 makes the gender disparity between top selling acts in the pre-MP3 era clear as day.<sup>43</sup>

Obviously, a number of these artists are outdated, but a list from 1992 or one from 2012 would reflect a similar problems. (A year noted for its unprecedented increase in successful female artists, 2012 saw seven women on the list of top forty earners, as well as two country acts that have women vocalists.)<sup>44</sup> Here, we see that the earnings of the three female artists on the list is equal to less than ten per cent of the total earnings of these artists. A more trenchant observation about the data herein would be that all three female artists, Cher, Britney Spears, and Celine Dion, earned the vast proportion of their income from concerts. The Rolling Stones' earnings are also dependent on live performance: their album sales were not as good as you might think even before the advent of MP3s.

Unfortunately for her, live performance is an arena that Liz Phair has always struggled with. Indeed, one

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<sup>43</sup> Figures are estimates of pre-tax gross income. The total income may exceed the sum of the first three columns because of TV, movie, merchandise and other potential sources of income (source: [http://www.milkeninstitute.org/publications/review/2007\\_7/50-66MR35.pdf](http://www.milkeninstitute.org/publications/review/2007_7/50-66MR35.pdf)).

<sup>44</sup> The seven artists, in reverse order of earnings, were Rihanna, Britney Spears, Adele, Celine Dion, Sade, Lady Gaga, and Taylor Swift. With the exception of Adele and Swift, the majority of their earnings came from touring. <http://www.billboard.com/articles/list/502623/musics-top-40-money-makers-2012> (accessed January 2, 2014).

## MAIN INCOME SOURCES, 2002 (MILLIONS)

RANK	ARTIST	CONCERTS	RECORDINGS	PUBLISHING	TOTAL
1	Paul McCartney	\$64.9	\$ 2.2	\$2.2	\$72.1
2	The Rolling Stones	39.6	0.9	2.2	44.0
3	Dave Matthews Band	27.9	0.0	2.5	31.3
4	Celine Dion	22.4	3.1	0.9	31.1
5	Eminem	5.5	10.4	3.8	28.9
6	Cher	26.2	0.5	0.0	26.7
7	Bruce Springsteen	17.9	2.2	4.5	24.8
8	Jay-Z	0.7	12.7	0.7	22.7
9	Ozzy Osbourne	3.8	0.2	0.5	22.5
10	Elton John	20.2	0.9	1.3	22.4
11	The Eagles	15.1	0.7	1.4	17.6
12	Jimmy Buffett	13.7	0.2	0.5	17.6
13	Billy Joel	16.0	0.0	1.0	17.0
14	Neil Diamond	16.5	0.0	0.3	16.8
15	Aerosmith	11.6	1.0	0.8	16.5
16	Crosby, Stills, Nash	15.7	0.0	0.3	16.0
17	Creed	10.9	1.1	1.6	13.4
18	Rush	13.4	0.0	0.0	13.4
19	Linkin Park	1.7	4.7	6.3	13.1
20	The Who	12.6	0.0	0.0	12.6
21	Red Hot Chili Peppers	6.1	3.4	2.7	12.1
22	Brian "Baby" Williams	0.2	2.7	0.9	11.8
23	'N Sync	7.7	0.5	0.9	9.4

RANK	ARTIST	CONCERTS	RECORDINGS	PUBLISHING	TOTAL
24	Barry Manilow	8.0	1.2	0.0	9.2
<b>25</b>	Britney Spears	5.5	1.8	1.0	9.1
26	Alan Jackson	4.6	3.0	1.4	9.0
27	Rod Stewart	6.6	1.4	0.8	8.8
28	Andrea Bocelli	8.1	0.2	0.4	8.7
29	Brooks and Dunn	6.7	0.4	1.4	8.1
30	Enrique Iglesias	4.4	1.5	1.7	7.6
31	Tom Petty	6.6	0.2	0.7	7.5
32	Tool	7.3	0.0	0.0	7.4
33	Kid Rock	3.4	0.8	1.3	7.0
34	Kenny Chesney	5.8	1.1	0.1	7.0
35	Santana	6.0	0.0	0.7	6.9

of the most common criticisms of her at the time that *Exile* came out was that she was a poor live performer. She was nervous. Her voice was often off key, and her guitar playing (supplemented by Casey Rice) left much to be desired. Reviews from that era often noted her inexperience, which stemmed from the fact that she had no background as a performer: prior to the release of *Exile in Guyville*, she had performed live only a handful of times. Like many rap stars (and English synth bands) she had to put together her act and her band *after* making the record, and hence her onstage confidence suffered, especially in comparison to most indie rock bands of the day. Most bands on labels like Matador had honed their chops on stages since they were teenagers, climbing the classic indie rock ladder: garage, friend's house, parking lot, small club, arenas.

I think of the performances of the bands I loved in the 1990s: Pavement, The Replacements, Pixies, The Afghan Whigs. They were characterized by a lot of shouting, intricate and pounding guitar patterns, a thumping bottom, the band members enjoying banter with each other and the crowd, making eye contact with the audience, moving around on stage, and showing throughout the night an intensity and an engagement with the scene. By contrast, Liz Phair on stage was practically static. The first time I saw her, she sat in a chair on the stage, playing her guitar and almost whispering her songs. Her onstage persona was funny and nice, but entirely lacking in intensity. She had had little experience playing live, and it showed.

Phair's inability to translate her album into a compelling live show—and, incidentally, her disinclination to tour

incessantly, the way that indie rock bands of that era did to gain a foothold in audiences when their records weren't being played on mainstream radio—explains not so much why her album didn't do better at the time, but why her name today is not more widely known. Phair didn't become a permanent fixture on the road, but concentrated on recording. Meanwhile, The Rolling Stones, who've had relatively dismal record sales (given their enormous public profile) for double decades, have turned an excellent live act and a boundless appetite for touring into world domination and global prominence for over a half century. Of course, the term “dismal sales” is only relative to the stature of the band in the public eye. The Rolling Stones' last studio album, “A Bigger Bang” (2005), sold—or rather, shipped—500,000 copies, which is more than *Exile in Guyville* has sold in two decades. But that doesn't compare to the twelve million copies their bestselling LPs moved back in the day, and certainly isn't many given that they routinely sell four times as many tickets to their concerts every time they tour.<sup>45</sup>

The Stones are a special case, of course. No other band has been able to sustain the energy needed to tour for decades. (Those that might have—The Beatles, The Ramones, and The Clash all come to mind—have been decimated by early deaths.<sup>46</sup>) And The Stones' business model—early radio hits, fantastic live shows, and then an amazing amount of band-wide stamina for the grueling world of the road—is the apex of the twentieth century

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<sup>45</sup> Their Bigger Bang (2005–7) and Voodoo Lounge (1994–5) tours combined sold ten million tickets.

<sup>46</sup> Thus proving there is no God.



art form: no other version of rock stardom comes close in terms of economic viability. Moreover, their formula for success points out a few salient points about rock stardom in the late twentieth century in America. To wit:

- ❖ To achieve economic success, performing live is essential.
- ❖ Touring widely can replace both radio airplay and good press in the hearts and minds of audiences who like to go to clubs and see local indie bands.
- ❖ There are penalties associated with not performing live, penalties that apply not only to small-scale indie rock artists like Phair, but to any artist that doesn't take it on the road. In short, not touring is how you get exiled *from* Main Street.

Another thing 'The Stones' formula points out is that success in the music industry is dependent on being a superstar. Simply put, the music industry is driven by superstars. And a superstar economy is not sustainable in the long term. A White Paper released by the White House in 2013 comparing the US economic situation with that of the music industry explained some of the problems with a system driven by superstars. In a speech given by the Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers at the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, Alan Krueger discussed how the music industry has turned into one that relies almost entirely on superstars performing live for revenue.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Council of Economic Advisers' blog post by David Vandivier, June 12, 2013. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/06/12/rock-and-roll-economics-and-rebuilding-middle-class> (accessed January 3, 2014).

Kreuger went on to explain why a superstar economy is detrimental to a field of industry (and, by analogy, to America): he argued that such a situation causes “an erosion of social norms that compress prices and incomes.”

One sees this in large cities like San Francisco, where I currently live—the “superstar” earners (in my city, that would be software engineers who power Twitter, Facebook, Google, and other businesses) drive up prices so that the regular earners are forced out of the area. In music, the equivalent problem occurs when superstars like Rihanna or Jay-Z dominate the field of musical production, so that other types of music are driven underground. This doesn’t mean that Rihanna and Jay-Z and even The Rolling Stones are evil, but it does mean that the systems that they serve promote economic inequality. Hence, the inherent humor in comparing one’s tiny indie effort to The Rolling Stones gargantuan, monumental one. The word “effrontery” is often used when writers refer to Phair’s record’s title, and her insistence on its having a relationship with that larger band’s work. But I prefer to think of it as a pointed comment on the inequalities inherent in the music business, inequalities that the indie rock world generally also enjoys emphasizing.

Thinking about The Rolling Stones’ life as a band in these terms—as a historical event, as it were—inevitably brings to mind Nietzsche’s remarks about the uses and abuses of history. These remarks can surely be applied to the way that different writers and artists think about rock music. Nietzsche sees historical actions as coming in three different modes: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. The monumental historian (that is, he

who thinks of history as monumental) tends to disparage everything around him as less than what came before. This is a marked characteristic of the indie rock fan, for whom an encyclopedia-like amount of knowledge of old records is key, and for whom the magnificence of past rock albums serve as a focal point for countless “best of” lists and contests.<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche himself, however, was critical of this standpoint, pointing out “how flowing and elusive, how imprecise” such comparisons are. “How much that is different must be overlooked, how ruthlessly must the individual of the past be forced into a general form and have all its sharp edges and lines broken for the sake of agreement ...” he wrote.<sup>49</sup>

Now, the antiquarian historian is all about preservation. According to Nietzsche, “by tending with loving hands what has long survived he intends to preserve the conditions in which he grew up for those who will come after him.”<sup>50</sup> This is also a process that occurs time and again within rock fandom and rock writing, particularly through the narrative and demand for authenticity that permeates all rock criticism. It is especially clear in the love of the blues and all that it stands for, and it is the starting point for a mindset that worships the obscure and the unheralded, the band no one else has ever heard of. As the old joke goes, how many hipsters does it take to

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<sup>48</sup> To wit, when The Flaming Lips played a cover of “Wish You Were Here” at a concert at the I Beam circa 1983, those who believed it was an original composition were disparaged within an inch of their life.

<sup>49</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*. (New York: Liberal Arts, 1957), 14.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

screw in a light bulb? Answer: A really obscure number you never heard of, or, alternately, Whatever—I liked gas lights before they sold out and became light bulbs ... the old form of illumination was so much better.

As the joke indicates, the antiquarian historian is at heart a conservative, always looking backwards at a perfect time that never existed. This is why the final type of historian, and the only one Nietzsche condones, is the critical historian: he who shatters and dissolves the past “by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally, condemning it: every past is worth condemning.”<sup>51</sup>

*Every past is worth condemning.* There are so many ways this fits the situation. Practically speaking, it could be a subtitle for *Exile in Guyville*. To begin, the album itself is a condemnation of the singer’s own past. As the title indicates, it’s a condemnation of a place, or of one’s place in a place, since by definition an exile is not where they belong. And it was a critique of The Rolling Stones. I call it a critique, but Liz herself has called it a “conversation.” As she told Jessica Hopper of *Spin* magazine in 2013:

My involvement with *Exile* was like an imaginary friend; whatever Mick was saying, it was a conversation with him, or I was arguing with him and it was kind of an amalgam of the men in my life. That was why I called it “Guyville”—friends, romantic interests, these teacher types—telling me what I needed to know, what was cool or what wasn’t cool.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>52</sup> Jessica Hopper, “Liz Phair: Exile in Guyville Oral History,” *Spin*, June 21, 2013. <http://www.spin.com/articles/liz-phair-exile-in-guyville-oral-history-best-1993/> (accessed January 2, 2014).

But this points out one of the most interesting conundrums of *Guyville*. The Rolling Stones are the epitome of corporate rock, but they are seldom criticized in any way, not only in the Guyville of yesteryear, but even today. Instead, it often seems like their brand of rock music—musically unchallenging, borrowed from better sources, and exuding an unapologetic sense of the world as white, male, and privileged—represents the quintessential appeal of *rock itself*. Having honed these qualities and attitudes into a perfect sonic *oeuvre*, they are its indisputable masters.

While acknowledging their mastery, this may explain why I have had a deep-seated contempt for The Rolling Stones now for many more years than I haven't. In the early 1990s, I gave an "F" to their live LP *Flashpoint* in a Time/Warner publication and the publisher himself called me up to complain about it. "Was I sure they deserve it?" he asked. Yes, I was sure—much more sure than, in later years, I've been about all the B+s I've given to actual students in my college courses, some of which may have had a much larger impact on individual students than The Stones' dumb F ever had on them. (Grading music irks me anyway, as do top ten lists. Music isn't/shouldn't be a contest. Nor should music fandom.) I wrote as follows: "by using only the 'best' takes from a series of different shows, by removing audience interference, and by overdubbing moments when their playing got extra messy, the Stones have wrecked the continuity of the experience of seeing them perform." And I also mused on my former love of them, saying:

I treasure the memory of the first time I saw the Stones (on July 26, 1977, which was Mick Jagger's 34th birthday)

... I'd hesitate to deny to any new young Stones fan, held in thrall as we were by the still-powerful strains of albums like *Let It Bleed* or *Exile on Main St.*, the pleasure of fantasizing about the band's glamour and fame. But that's exactly why I'd advise those same fans not to buy *Flashpoint*—because illusions like the ones those great albums can still create are far too precious to be torched by a single spin of this lousy record.<sup>53</sup>

Reading those words today reminded me that I did once love The Rolling Stones. I have seen them perform live five times, and spun their earlier records until they melted on the turntable, but nowadays it's easier for me to think of things I dislike about them than recall the things I liked. For example, I dislike the wide, nasal sound of Mick Jagger's vowel sounds, "rock 'n' rowl," "street fighting maaaaan," "she's a rainboooooow," and so on. I can't stand the predictable rhythm section chugging along, and there are a number of their slow ballads ("Wild Horses" and "Angie," for example) that are pretty darn sleep-inducing. The Stones' catalog isn't exactly subtle, either: I once learned "Dead Flowers" on guitar and found it both boring to play and sing and inherently meaningless. Finally, whenever I have watched them perform live, I am unimpressed by Mick Jagger's antics. He reminds me of a spastic spider crossed with a rabid fly.

And yet, I am well aware that hating The Rolling Stones is not really an acceptable stance in contemporary

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<sup>53</sup> Arnold, Gina. "Flashpoint." *Entertainment Weekly*, April 19, 1991. <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,314063,00.html> (accessed January 2, 2014).

American society. To most Baby Boomers, the band represents an intangibly romantic aspect of the post-war twentieth century, a kind of *Mad Men*-like, Cold War-esque glamour wrapped up in social attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s. So for many years after I reviewed *Flashpoint*, I tried to keep my contempt hidden, but I can recall many moments when it welled up for them anew, like the time a different publisher took me to see them in the newspaper box of a sports stadium, where we watched them in a carpeted sports suite full of odious be-suited bozos who were shrieking “Brown Sugar” at the top of their lungs (“Just like a young girl should!”). Or the different, but equally unsettling, time I watched them while seated next to Johnny Ramone, uneasily aware that my neighbor’s band was superior in every particular. At the first event, the besotted publisher turned to me and said, ‘Wow, I can’t believe I’m in the same room as Mick Jagger!’ That the room was the size of an airplane hangar didn’t seem to bother him: just being in the vicinity was a thrill, and I think that he spoke for everyone in that arena.

Anyway, after these and other similar incidents and comments, at some point, I grew to hate them so much that, as I wrote in a review of a concert, “Sometimes I hate them so much I think I must secretly love them.” And in fact, this is true. I am sure the reason I hate them so much is that I *did* once love them; because for a short while in my childhood, I entered into the Cold War-era white man’s fantasy of the glamorous life full hearted. As a teenager, I owned two of their LPs, *High Tide and Green Grass* (a Greatest Hits LP) and *Let It Bleed*, and I played both so many times that they warped. I also

owned a hideous red silk scarf, which I once tried to wear à la Mick to school, over a cowl neck or something. And I went to the midnight movies to see the films of their live shows, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, *The Rolling Stones* and *Gimme Shelter*, in the hopes that I could stare my way into their glamorous planet. In them, Jagger was riveting.

Twelve years after *Gimme Shelter* was released—in other words, around the time I first saw it—Allen Bloom singled out The Stones in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* as a primal force in the decline of western civilization: he termed them an amoral force with the power to legitimate drugs and appeal to suppressed inclinations of sexism, racism, and violence. Bloom calls Jagger

a shrewd middle class boy who played the possessed lower class demon and teenaged satyr up until he was forty, with one eye on the mobs of children of both sexes whom he stimulates to a sensual frenzy and the other eye winking at the unerotic, commercially motivated adults who handled their money.<sup>54</sup>

Replace the word “forty” with “seventy” and “mobs of children” with “mobs of the middle aged” and the words ring sadly true today. But it doesn’t discount the fact that I too believed for a while that The Stones were cool, due mostly to the aforementioned filmed depictions. One reason I found those films so hip, however, was that those

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<sup>54</sup> Allan David Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 78.



were the pre-MTV, pre-YouTube days when the sight of a rock star in motion was not only mesmerizing, but so unusual that these two films were able to play once a month at the local movie theater downtown throughout my childhood.

A few years later, however, when I was in college, I went with my friend Bill to see a rare showing of *Cocksucker Blues* at Wheeler Hall on the UC Berkeley campus. We must have been in the company of photographer/director Robert Frank, whose presence is still required to allow any such screening (although today it can be seen through the magic of YouTube and BitTorrent, so the prohibition is ridiculous, serving only to heighten its value). The movie follows The Stones through America on their post-*Exile* tour, with numerous scenes of drugs being mainlined and TVs being tossed off balconies and an overwhelming sense of *ennui*. The scene that made the biggest impression on me at the time, however, was one where a bunch of roadies pull a train on a plane—that is, they take turns having sex—with a groupie while The Stones stand around watching in a bored manner, beating bongos.

Today this scene seems pretty tame in comparison to a single episode of *Bad Girls* or *Jersey Shore*, but just as it predated YouTube, those were also the days before the invention of date rape. (Just like Katy Perry, in my day we just called it “I was soooo drunk last night.”) It was also before roofies or the morning-after pill and the pornification of popular culture, the real point being that I had never seen live sex before and I guess it shocked me a lot more than I knew at the time. Indeed, it shocked me straight: soon after that, I stopped liking The Stones. It

wasn't so much the act itself (which can't really be seen on the film—it's all arms and legs blocked by airplane seats) but the idea of an unseen girl being systematically violated by fat, ugly, bearded roadies while others watch with bemusement. That just turned me off to the *mise en scène*, and without that sense of wanting to belong to the *mise en scène*, The Stones' music suddenly turned cold.

I'm old enough now that I understand that to some people the sight of girls masturbating and having sex in groups is erotic, but at the time to me it just seemed depressing. (Moreover, as The Young Fresh Fellows once so achingly put it: I wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then.) The desperate girl was depressing. The lecherous roadies were depressing and disgusting. Most of all, The Stones, staring down at them, bored and disdainful, were depressing—like noxious, villainous Roman emperors no one in their right mind would want to worship, because it would be like rooting for Caligula.

*Cocksucker Blues* was an apotheosis. I turned away from The Rolling Stones forever, and turned towards a world where I thought such abominations didn't occur. It's no wonder I'm not a huge fan of *Exile on Main St.*: *Cocksucker Blues* captures the band at that time far better, I think, than the record itself. To me (and again, I totally understand that I am in the minority), *Exile on Main St.* is incoherent. It expresses at best unoriginal ideas about life and drugs, held together only by the powerful aura of The Stones themselves, an aura of which, as I have just explained, I had a very different vision after seeing *Cocksucker Blues*. For me, *Exile on Main St.* ignites a sense of helplessness and voicelessness in the face of fanatical male devotion. Perhaps it is the same feeling men get

when listening to women scream for Justin Bieber. But my own reaction to that feeling of voicelessness was to rage against The Rolling Stones in print for a good fifteen years. I called them dumb, lame, old: I gave them an “F,” and none of it made a dent. It just rebounded on me in ways that still make me blush.

Liz Phair’s reaction was different, and a lot smarter. *Exile in Guyville* doesn’t mock The Rolling Stones, or mimic them—it is a separate artistic vision entirely. But just by borrowing the title, Liz told people that her record was a response to The Stones—a conceit that she exacerbated in interviews, claiming that she truly was answering that record song by song. (In fact, the main way she mimicked the record was numerical: *Exile in Guyville* has the same number of tracks—18—divided into the same track number per side, a conceit that became unnoticeable in the era of the CD and even more invisible and pointless in the age of the MP3.)

At the time, I disregarded both that gesture and this line of chat as obvious leg-pulls on critics. Other than having the same number of songs and a gatefold in which she looked a little bit Stonesy, the record’s music didn’t draw on the same sources, use the same language, or talk about the same subjects; therefore, to me, all Liz Phair was doing was drawing attention to the fact that *Exile on Main St.* was the most admired record of white guys in Guyville, and that therefore a person who entered Guyville was going to be required to come to terms with it.

But now I’m not so sure. I’ve gone back and listened to each track to see if in fact it responds to *Main St.* track by track, and I do think that, to a certain extent,

it is a clear response to The Stones' overall vision of the world. For example, consider the first two tracks on each album—The Rolling Stones' "Rocks Off" and Liz Phair's "6'1". Recorded in a villa in the south of France, "Rocks Off" is about injecting heroin. It is notoriously out of tune. It is also a song about being out of control, misunderstood, and, frankly, not giving a shit. It is about satiation, and being too high, or too rich, or just too damned lazy to be pleased except in one's head. Its chorus is, "I only get my rocks off while I'm dreaming."

In the first song on her record, "6'1", Liz Phair responds to this satiation with a chord sequence as off key and choppy as Keith Richard's, accompanied by this lyric: "I bet you fall in bed too easily / with the beautiful girls who are shyly brave and you sell yourself as a fantasy / but all the money in the world is not enough ...". Here, she notes the way that the men in Guyville, much like their secret role model Mick Jagger, have long since passed understanding what it takes to be satisfied. After noting this, Liz states that she is five foot two, but that she'll keep standing six foot one. In other words, she is short. She's a girl. But she *acts* six foot one.

Many years later, she told *Village Voice*:

"Guyville" was a specific scene in Chicago—predominately male, indie-rock—and they had their little establishment of, like, who was cool, who was in it, who played in what band. Each one wore their record collection, so to speak, like a badge of honor. Like, "This is my identity, this is what I'm into, and I know a lot about it."

It was just like: “Really? OK, so you guys are into music. Watch—I can make music.”

And so with “6’1”” she enters Guyville on her own terms, aping the swagger if not the meaning of “Rocks Off.” She mimics the sense that she is crashing through a glass ceiling, growing like Alice, getting bigger and bigger—as she sings, “like a vine that keeps climbing higher”—both for her britches and for Guyville, and most of all for the music business. She is so big that, like Keith Richards before her, no busted bridge can stop her: she can afford to lie around on Persian carpets and dream of getting her rocks off ... minus the men who made her miserable.

The next song pairing from *Main St.* and *Guyville* is equally obvious if you think about it. Song number two, “Rip This Joint,” is the fastest and the shortest song on *Exile on Main St.*. It lasts a little over two minutes. In a review in Allmusic.com, writer and musician Bill Janovitz, whose band Buffalo Tom roamed Guyville in 1990 and who later authored the book in this series on *Exile on Main St.*, enthused:

though the band most likely did not sit down and preconceive it as such, the record seems to set out to cover nothing less than the wide-open spaces of America itself via the nation’s music—from urban soul to down-home country to New Orleans jazz. “Rip his Joint” sets the tone for this journey, as a modern-day “Route 66” travelogue from Birmingham to San Diego.

Since the song was written during the time of The Stones’ US immigration problems, lists by name a number of

American cities, and then promises to show up and “rip this joint,” it is often said to be a swaggering promise to tear the roof of every arena in America.

“Help Me Mary,” the second song on *Guyville*, is a similarly short song, though not quite as fast. It is not a song about touring America, but about living in America—more specifically, about living with roommates who annoy you—something Phair knew something about, because at the time, in Guyville and everywhere like it (Hoboken, Dinkytown, Capitol Hill, Athens, the Mission District in San Francisco), roommates were an economic necessity, usually in a not-so-nice neighborhood, location being sacrificed for size. There were dozens of these indie rock houses in every big city in the nineties—homes shared by three or four or six or seven roommates. Such houses made the entire indie scene possible by allowing young people to live in big houses where they could store and practice their instruments without working too hard at some laborious job. They were also the community centers where opinions were shared and developed and spread (along with fashion trends and venereal diseases). Finally, they were places where touring bands could spend the night after their gigs.

“Help Me Mary” highlights the invaluable economic role that women played in Guyville, housing and feeding many a musician in their share-houses, supporting the scene in a very literal manner. Many indie rock fans worked at serious jobs at the indie record labels—publicists, or office managers—that were crucial to the functioning of these labels in the first place. Such jobs were often poorly paid and needed a person who was

smart, fast, efficient, and committed to doing things right. As with so many other occupations, this meant that the majority of these positions were held by women.

Women, then, ought to have had a measure of self-confidence when dealing with the men of the indie rock scene, but I don't think they did. "Help Me Mary" is the only song I know of in which a person complains of the niggling, day-to-day irritations of house life; at its finish, the singer swaggers about escaping. What links "Rip This Joint" and "Help Me Mary," then, is that both are songs about being kept under house arrest by stupid rules—in the case of The Stones, being unable to enter the US due to prior marijuana convictions, and in the case of Liz Phair, by the dirty dish rotation—and both are songs which imagine terrorizing the "joint" that holds them back.

There is one thing that Liz Phair's album does not have in common with The Stones': covers. The latter's third track, "Shake Your Hips," is a cover of a 1966 Slim Harpo song. If Liz Phair had been really scrupulous about her project's supposed use of *Exile*, then the next song on it would have been a faithful cover, preferably of something fairly contemporary, something über-cool, African American, and "authentic"; maybe something by NWA or Wu-Tang Clan; maybe something from the *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, or Mary J. Blige's song "No More Drama." Instead, *Guyville*'s third song, "Glory," merely recoups The Stones' attempt to authenticate themselves by way of Slim Harpo's cachet. If to be authentic in rock music is to be working class, African American, and a blues musician, then The Stones' authenticity as at best on loan. Liz Phair doesn't borrow

anything on this record, but the song “Glory” does reference this idea in its most significant lyric, “you are shining some glory on me.” In other words, in that one line, she utters a cruel, but not untruthful, assessment of why The Stones turn to the Slim Harpos of the world: because Slim Harpo shines some glory on *them*.

The fourth song on *Main St.*, “Casino Boogie,” and the song it is paired with on *Guyville*, “Dance of the Seven Veils,” have a single word in common: “cunt.” Ironically, the use of this word goes unremarked in every article you’ll ever read on The Stones (granted, given their garbled syntax, probably hardly anyone understood it), but it’s invariably remarked upon on every article you will ever read about Liz Phair. Perhaps the reason for this difference has to do with context. In The Stones’ song, the word is stuck in a nonsense jabber of meaninglessness, like so: “Kissing cunt in Cannes / grotesque music / million dollar sad.” Liz sings it like this: “I’m a real cunt in spring / you can rent me by the hour.”

For The Stones, the phrase in question seems to refer to demeaning yourself when you’re hanging out with the glitterati. For them, “kissing cunt” is linked to phoniness and irony. This is true whether they mean it literally (as in giving head) or figuratively, that is using the word “cunt” the way the British sometimes do, as a pejorative group noun for “women.”<sup>55</sup> Here, it is a synonym for ass.

This is not what Liz is saying on her song “Dance of the Seven Veils.” Far from being nonsense syllables strung randomly together (which is how The Stones themselves have characterized the words to “Casino

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<sup>55</sup> The word isn’t as shocking to British ears.



Boogie”), this song is heavily allegorical, referring to the biblical story of Salome, King Herod, and John the Baptist. Salome, incensed because John the Baptist has rebuffed her overtures, dances the dance of the seven veils for King Herod, and is rewarded for her dance by John’s severed head. Phair’s song is pretty clearly a rewriting of this story: the singer is angry at a guy called Johnny, so angry that she wants to “pump him full of lead”; later, she tells us, she has a bright and shiny platter, and she is going to “get your heavy head.”

The song makes some veiled references to the music business, which may indicate that Johnny is in a band. As for the word “cunt,” it may be that Phair is simply asserting that sometimes women have sex drives that rival men’s: in the context of the story, however, Salome was such a “cunt” that she had John executed for rejecting her.

It may also simply be a vocative that gets one’s attention, as in *Ghost World*, or else a cleverly planted mimicry of what Johnny calls her: perhaps it’s what enraged her in the first place. Either way, the reception of “Dance of the Seven Veils” says a lot about the power of expletives in the mouths of women—and their equally explosive quality in the press.

Moving on, “Tumbling Dice and “Never Said” are possibly the two catchiest songs on both these records and both of them were singles. This would give some logic to the song order, but in other ways these two songs are lyrically at odds. The theme of “Tumbling Dice” is the story of a “lone crap shooter” who sleeps with a different woman every night. The women, alas, are always trying to drag him down, with their bitchin’ and

itchin', but the men—i.e. the proverbial 'tumbly dice' of the title—can't be tied down. Great riff. Nice metaphor. Internal meaning not so pleasant, but that's The Stones all over.

By contrast, "Never Said" is about keeping secrets, probably the secret of who is sleeping with whom. Liz, alas, was unable to keep whom she was sleeping with secret and suffered the tortures of the damned when her record came out. People guessed this and that and accused her of "sleeping her way" to the top, in the same manner as they had accused Madonna. (Oddly, unlike Madonna, she is not now a billionaire.) People know who Mick Jagger sleeps with too—Carly Simon, Carla Bruni—but somehow it never seemed to have the same repercussions as Liz's peccadilloes. One has to wonder what secret Mick Jagger could have that, if told, would affect him in any way. As has been the case with Woody Allen, there seems to be no action he can take that would get him laughed at, judged, or censured.

"Sweet Virginia" is a song about a drifter who takes a lot of drugs (reds, greens, and blues) is trying to come down from various highs, and he calls on his "sweet Virginia" to help him scrape the shit off his shoes. It is reminiscent of the song "Dead Flowers" in chord changes and rhythm.

By contrast, its paired song, "Soap Star Joe," is about a guy who thinks he's a "hero in a long line of heroes, looking for someone attractive to save." Perhaps he is a grown up GI Joe, looking for Barbie, steeped in soap opera plot lines and unable to see the real world because he is surrounded by advertisements, billboards, and dumb movies, but if he is, then it is a pity he "sprang

from the head of Athena” (in direct contrast to the Greek myth, wherein Athena sprang from the head of Zeus). Soap Star Joe is the quintessential American—“check out America!” goes the chorus—but it is not the Main Street of America that The Stones romanticize: rather, it is the one with thinning hair, smelling aftershave, and pickup trucks. It’s a stretch to say what these two songs have in common, but it could be that each one has at its core a character—the singer of “Sweet Virginia,” and soap star Joe—who are full of pretensions.

The next song on *Guyville*, “Explain it to Me,” is about a similar character, whose head is also under water. According to Phair, he can’t jump high enough or far enough, he can’t get famous enough, and he can’t explain why it matters. From her tone of voice, it sounds like Liz Phair has pity for this person. In other words, all these songs—“Soap Star Joe,” “Sweet Virginia,” “Torn and Frayed,” and “Explain it to Me”—could be said to be about people caught up in the reality of rock ’n’ roll bullshit. The guy in “Torn and Frayed” is presented as a romantic figure. The guy in “Explain it to Me” is hopeless. It has been said, by Phair herself, that this song is about a fading rock star: the line “Give him his medicine/fame injection” speaks to that, as does the reference to the fact that the character has remained famous “ten times longer than you ever should.” Although I think she may have meant someone closer to home, it could be that this song is actually about Mick Jagger, and that in her mind he is torn and frayed. That’s how he seems to me, at least.

The next-up Stones song, “Sweet Black Angel,” is about Angela Davis, who is currently a distinguished Professor Emerita at UC Santa Cruz. At the time the

song was written, Davis was in jail, facing murder charges. (She was acquitted.) In it, Jagger refers to her as a “sweet black angel, not a gun toting teacher,” and wonders, “ain’t someone gonna free her / the sweet black slave.” The song is sung in a lilting rasta dialect, and uses the N word, and both of these things bother me, especially as I’m not sure how clear the connection to Angela Davis is to those who are not able to access the internet (i.e. everyone who heard this song prior to about 1995). Without that connection, the N word and the rasta lilt are pretty indefensible, and even with it, well ... I don’t know. Those aspects of the song overshadow even my unhappiness at her being referred to as a “sweet black angel,” and a “sweet black slave,” particularly as she was not just now, but *then*, a college professor.

Its paired song, “Canary,” is about the difficulty of being a “good girl”—coloring inside the lines, always being obedient, doing your chores, being liked, and, as a consequence, faking orgasms. “I come when called,” sings Liz. “I come, that’s all.” Liz herself has said that this song is about stressful family relationships, family dysfunction, disappearing into music and sending it up to the heavens to attest to her frustration: “deaf before dawn.” Phair’s description of the emotional life of a middle-class white girl is a far cry from ‘The Stones’ of Davis, a radical black leftist, but there is a poignancy to pairing these two songs, since this may be one of the only songs The Stones ever wrote about a real, live woman with real-world problems, rather than about those bodies that contain vaginas that they seem to love so much. Also, the word “slave” here is not meant metaphorically: the position that Davis was in at that time—in chains—was, indeed, enslaved.

By contrast, Phair's own chains are metaphorical, but as she seems to know, she and Davis are soul sisters, linked in this one moment by the fact that a canary lives in a cage. So, at the time this record was released, did Angela Davis.

In the song "Loving Cup" Mick pretends he's a humble plowman, sitting around a camp fire having just hunted and fished, and is now by the fire with a girl he likes, shooting the shit. It's basically a song about feeling groovy, and Phair's "Mesmerizing" has it hands down. It isn't just a ditty: it's about being happy for the wrong reasons, about hanging out with someone you shouldn't, someone who cares less about you than you do about them, about knowing that you're in the moment and it won't last but nevertheless feeling pretty good about it. Musically, it is a meditation on a great riff, much more acute and catchy than Nicky Hopkins' rote honky-tonk; it feels, like all the best music, like it's just been crafted in front of your ears, for you personally, as you listen. Lyrically, the song is a bit impressionistic, but more poetic than anything than The Stones would ever come up with, and it's emotionally far more believable when she sings "with all of the time in the world to spend, wild and unwise, I want to be mesmerizing too."

Now this is interesting, because *mesmerizing* is what Mick Jagger actually is, as a person, like it or not. The word itself even comes up on *Exile* elsewhere (in "Rocks Off" to be exact, to describe being stoned). Liz would like to be mesmerizing, and the confession gives a frisson of recognition, particularly when set, as it is, in a record called *Exile in Guyville*.

The Stones' last song was about happiness. But despite its name, "Happy" is not. Like another more famous

Stones song before it, it's about being unsatisfied. On it, Keith Richards sings: "I need a love to keep me happy / baby, won't you keep me happy." On "Fuck and Run," Liz has a similar, albeit better-spoken, plea: after waking up from yet another one-night stand, she decides "I want all that stupid shit like letters and sodas / I want a guy who makes love 'cos he's in it ... I want a boyfriend."

At this moment, *Exile on Main St.* and *Exile in Guyville* actually do intertwine, and they will continue to do so more and more as both albums wend to their closes. Is it possible that men and women are not so dissimilar, that they are in fact in search of the same things after all? No, I think not. Indeed, it's fair to say that Mick Jagger's and Keith Richards' wants and needs are entirely opposite to those of Liz Phair, even if she too avers here that she needs a lover to keep her happy. Many people have pointed out that this song reads differently in its first incarnation (on the *Girlysound* tape), because it includes a verse that reverses the gender ("you want a chick that makes love cos she's in it ... you want a girlfriend," etc.). It's not clear why this was left out of the *Exile in Guyville* version, but even without it, the juxtaposition of these songs is a cautionary tale of gender difference.

In the song "Turd on the Run," Mick is chasing some hot girl who slips away despite large helpings of diamond rings and Vaseline. On "Girls! Girls! Girls!" Liz clearly takes on the role of the turd in question. She sings: "I take full advantage of every man I meet / I get away with what the girls call murder." She is the girl with the diamond rings and Vaseline, taking Mick Jagger for a ride. She is, in short, an unapologetic turd.

Sadly, the song and the statement have haunted her. Instead of being seen as a third-wave feminist (that

is, a feminist who embraces overt female sexuality as a position of empowerment, rather than seeing it as a by product of oppression), this song in particular has allowed Phair-haters to reconfigure her as a female chauvinist. And yet all it does is mock the level of delusion that coats many Stones songs—"Some Girls," for instance, in which women, as a class, do their best to drive Mick crazy, but fail because he is just so cool.<sup>56</sup> Who is the turd, then—Mick or Liz? Clearly, the idea that taking advantage of men, of "getting away with what the girls call murder," is meant ironically.

The charms of the next Stones song in the series, "Ventilator Blues," reside in the chugging blues rhythm and Mick Jagger's hideous drawl, which many a critic has termed "menacing." But even the most ardent Stones fan is going to have to admit that these have to be some of the worst lyrics ever written. They sound like the Moldavian entry in the Eurovision Song Contest. At one point, Jagger exclaims in a particularly nonsensical verse that he "can't be browed by beating." I take the lyrics to mean that when ladies cheat on Mick Jagger, it makes his blood pressure rise. Also, that the ladies get scary when they're mad: sharper than a serpent's tooth, etc., etc.

By contrast, "Divorce Song," Liz Phair's version of the same battle of the sexes, is more conversational, more thought provoking, and definitely more real. The song begins on a road trip, where a couple—possibly friends with benefits—has started to get on each other's nerves. When they arrive at the motel, she asks for a separate

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<sup>56</sup> "Black girls just want to get fucked all night," he sings.

room, and the shit hits the fan: “But if I’d known how that would sound to you” (she sings):

I would have stayed in your bed / for the rest of my life  
just to prove I was right, / that it’s harder to be friends  
than lovers. / And you shouldn’t try and mix the two. /  
Because if you do it and you’re still unhappy / then you  
know that the problem is you. / And it’s true that I stole  
your lighter / and it’s true that I lost the map. / But when  
you said that I wasn’t worth talking to, / well I had to take  
your word on that.

Some might say that she is browning, that is, cowing, this putative lover, who sounds irritating as hell. And perhaps she *is* browning him. But then, as she puts it, “[You] put in my hands a loaded gun and told me not to fire it ... When you did the things you said were up to me and then accused me of trying to fuck it up.”

So the question occurs. Who put the gun in her hand? Some might think it’s the guy in the song. But I think that Mick himself put the gun in her hand, and then, irritatingly, he accused her of something he did himself. In this passage, Phair actually does respond to an accusation made on *Exile*: the accusation that angry women wave guns at the men who betray them; that they are irrational, that they shoot off their mouths.

“Divorce Song” serves as a reminder that many irrational women are having their mouths and minds “loaded” by the men, who then turn around and accuse them of “fucking everything up.” At the same time, it seems far from irrational: it is possibly the best-sung, catchiest, and most heartfelt song on this record.



A song that does not feel heartfelt to me, however, is The Stones' "I Just Want to See His Face." It is a stream of consciousness jam, with lyrics that are about Jesus. Phair's "Shatter," though less improvised, is also a mood piece about faith and belief, even though I find it hard to believe that Mick Jagger really believes in God, and for me this falsifies the feel of the music. "Shatter" begins where "I Just Want to See His Face" ends—with a moral realization. "I don't always realize how sleazy it is messing with these guys," she muses, before speculating (in stream of consciousness) that it might be possible to get back together. In other words, she wants to see his face again. Thus, the song connects to The Stones' song in two ways: musically, as a largely instrumental jam, and thematically. And in a side note, it is interesting that Phair borrows the title of another Stones song, from way later in their career—from the egregious "Some Girls," as a matter of fact. That song goes: "laughter, joy and loneliness and sex and sex and sex and sex ... look at me! I'm in tatters!" This lyric could be considered as close as Mick Jagger will ever get to admitting that sex can be an empty diversion; but when you think about it, *Exile in Guyville* really takes that idea as its central tenet.

"Let it Loose" is the requisite ballad that every Stones album has: the "Angie," the "You Got the Silver," the "Wild Horses." It's a love song, of sorts, about a girl who's good in bed. In order, it is paired with the song "Flower," Liz Phair's most famous dirty song, the one in which she simply spouts a bunch of filthy phone sex-type lines about what she wants to do to some guy she likes: "You're probably shy and introspective / that's not part of my objective," she sings. It is an interesting response

to “Let it Loose,” to say the least. Is she saying that this is what The Stones are always after? That women are the same as men? That sex is a universal? That rock music is about sex? I think she’s saying all these things, and possibly more. Be that as it may, the song called attention to itself, to its singer, and to the album it came from in no uncertain terms; it was like shouting “fire” in a crowded theater (or whispering a cuss word into a young man’s ear). The first metaphor would qualify it as “at risk” speech, unprotected by the first amendment, and that’s not far off the way it was treated by the press, whose collective response to this song was rabid.

Luckily for the FCC, “Flower” can’t really be sung along with, being a round, and it can’t be played on the radio. But it let loose the dogs of war, in the sense that much that has been written about Phair subsequently has been about her libido and her dirty mouth. It is actually quite a bit more frank and risqué than anything The Stones sing, yet it does capture the underlying message of their libidinous oeuvre in its entirety.

The next song on *Guyville*, “Johnny Sunshine,” has three different melodies, an overdubbed duet, and a car metaphor at its center. The only thing it has in common with “All Down the Line,” the song it responds to on *Main St.*, is that both songs are about getaways, and compare the idea of the getaway car with someone escaping a relationship. At the end of “Johnny Sunshine,” Liz sings in a bluesy voice, “I’ve been taken for everything I own / I’m alone, baby I’m alone.”

“Stop Breaking Down” is a Robert Johnson cover about a shotgun wedding. “Gunshy” answers back that marriage is stultifyingly boring. “Take out the garbage

on Tuesdays nights / seems like the small things are the only things I'll fight ... send three bucks to a comic book / get a house/car/wife." In short, though widely different in tone, tune, and intention, both songs argue against marriage as an institution.

Up to this point in the lineup, one is able to clearly follow Liz Phair's matching up of songs on *Main St.* and *Guyville*. Sometimes her songs respond to The Stones' content, and sometimes to their intention, but usually there is a recognizable thread connecting the two. The same can't be said, however, about the final two songs. *Exile on Main St.* ends with some of its least-memorable numbers, "Shine a Light" and "Soul Survivor." The album's opposite numbers on *Guyville*, "Stratford-on-Guy" and "Strange Loop," take flight. The first number, in particular, literally soars over Chicago, and reflects on its place on the universe. Truly, the only thing this song has in common with the one on The Stones' opus is that it takes the idea of a shining light and explodes it into the proverbial thousand suns.

I once heard Boston College professor Carlo Rotella compare "Stratford-on-Guy" to the opening passages of *Sister Carrie*, in which Carrie comes to Chicago. What Dreiser wrote is eerily similar in tone to the beginning of this song:

To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveller, the approach to a great city for the first time is wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening—that mystic period between the glare and gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another. Ah, the promise of the night. What does it not

hold for the weary! What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated! Says the soul of the toiler to itself, "I shall soon be free. I shall be in the ways and the hosts of the merry. The streets, the lamps, the lighted chamber set for dining, are for me. The theatre, the halls, the parties, the ways of rest and the paths of song—these are mine in the night." Though all humanity be still enclosed in the shops, the thrill runs abroad. It is in the air. The dullest feel something which they may not always express or describe. It is the lifting of the burden of toil.<sup>57</sup>

Though written 100 years later, "Stratford-on-Guy" is about that very promise. The only difference is that Phair's approach to the city is from above. The song begins on an airplane flying into Chicago at night. In the song, Liz (the genius with imagination) is suddenly prompted to look down at Chicago from an airplane at sunset—that mystic period between glare and gloom—from which she is able to observe "the lake turn the sky into blue green smoke." And as she does so, she reimagines Guyville (that is, Wicker Park) when she sees it—literally—as a small point on the map, one where, as Dreiser said, she shall soon be free. Out of the farmlands, and into the grid, she waits as the cabin fills with an unearthly glow. And suddenly, from 30,000 feet, she claims, she listens carefully, and she no longer hears the noise—she no longer hears the music. *The burden of toil is lifted*. In other words, from that vantage point, and in this song, she gains perspective on her life in Guyville.

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<sup>57</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 21.

It is a beautiful end to the story. Indeed, “Stratford-on-Guy” would be a great place to end a novel. But “Strange Loop,” *Guyville*’s final song, is a better place to end a record. Listening to it right now makes me remember the limitations of writing about music: you can do whatever academic exercise you want on the stuff, but in the end, you’ll never really be able to convey the power and beauty of a chord change, or why a particular record resonates. All you can do is listen to the words, which pay tribute to Liz’s own insight into her problematic personality.

*Exile in Guyville* closes with the words “I only wanted more than I knew,” a statement that sums up almost everyone’s life at the age of twenty-six—as well as summarizing Liz Phair’s personal ambition to compete with The Rolling Stones. Despite my dislike of the latter, deep down I don’t actually think that *Guyville* is a better record than *Main St.* I just think I like it a lot better. *Exile on Main St.* and *Exile in Guyville* each stand on their own merits. Each expresses something unique about its time and place and, more importantly, about its creator. Liz Phair may have been haunted by The Stones, but influenced by them? No more so than I was, all those years ago, when I bought a red satin scarf at Macy’s and soon realized that it wasn’t going to fit into my teenage wardrobe; that it would hang limply off a hanger until I went to college and finally threw it out.

## Exile State of Mind

One day last autumn I flew into Chicago at night, watching the lake turn the sky into a blue-green smoke. As my flight wheeled over Lake Erie, the reflection of the atmosphere was indeed a liquid turquoise shadow, and what had once been a beautifully turned lyric turned into cold hard fact.

It had been fifteen or so years since I'd last been there, and what changes had occurred to the city in that time were initially invisible to a stranger like me. The Hancock Building and the Water Tower, the Lake and the El and the Loop all seemed the same as the place I'd known back in the twentieth century. Sure, there was a giant Apple store on Michigan Avenue that hadn't been there before, but otherwise, the city seemed the same gritty, well-lit and happy place it had been before—still New York with nicer cabbies, as I used to call it.

It was only after I'd walked around for a while that I started to notice that parts of Chicago looked suspiciously like Seoul. It was cleaner, for one thing. Shinier. And it was much more international, with British stores like All Saints and Topshop and restaurants serving Taiwanese bao (buns) alongside the M Burger chains.

And the same went for Wicker Park. When I knew it, in the early 1990s, Wicker Park was one of those slightly dangerous, edgy, neighborhoods where lofts and practice spaces were cheap to rent, where young women didn't wander around alone at night without an escort, and sometimes even the escort was nervous. The store fronts were run down and the bars were all dives; there were coffee shops rather than cafés and one bought one's clothing second hand. Now, there's an American Apparel and an Urban Outfitters shop, in between cute clothing boutiques and fancy brunch spots. According to the real estate site Trulia.com, a single family home there goes for over a million dollars. The nightclubs and bars still cater to hipsters, but the hipsters are more legion and the restaurants are cleaner and more upscale. Wicker Park is the Gangnam of Chicago, full of Wi-Fi-enabled cafes and the young people who frequent them.

What's happened to Wicker Park has happened to similar arty neighborhoods all over America. In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, Chicago's boats were lifted with the rising tide of the economy. From the mid-1990s until the dot-com bubble burst (and the Twin Towers came down), America experienced high employment and low inflation, and perhaps that accounts for an accompanying sea change in the values that young people leaving college professed to admire. Perhaps after Reagan and the icky conservative policies he represented began to fade out, the rebel individuality and artistic iconoclasm that once seemed cool to champion stopped being as appealing as new opportunities in capitalism and the internet. Who'd want to be in a band when dot-com entrepreneurship and the joys of the social network beckoned?

In short, after the advent of digital technology changed much of the media landscape, the world we lived in then—our little group who'd always been and always will, until the end—no longer needs to exist in the same way it did. Since digital downloading has 'freed' music from the corporate world, the indie scene such as it was is now a meaningless construct. It's over. No kidding: it's over—as far away from now as World War II was at my birth. And yet, as I wandered about the new Chicago (with my newfangled headphones in my oldfangled ears), I wondered about Guyville. In one sense, I am sure there are a lot of new Guyvilles in the United States. But if we take Guyville to be a metaphor for a bohemian American music community and an aesthetic bounded and policed by male-determined standards of what's good and what's bad, then I would say that it is foundering. What surprised me about that realization is that there is some poignancy to its loss.

When I began this book, I did not set out to write a screed on third-wave feminism or a nostalgia-ridden lament on the death of indie rock. Instead, I've tried in these pages to show what it was about those times that made this record unique, why Liz Phair herself was considered an outlier and a traitor by some, and why others (me, for instance) embraced her story as one in dire need of telling. What I discovered while writing it was that, despite the fact that its context is so specific, the record doesn't really need that back-story to stand on its own musical merits. The narrative and emotional appeals it makes are strong enough to stand the test of time.

At the same time, the telling of this tale has served as a reminder to me of how much has changed in music. The



change from Victrola to gramophone to hi-fis to CDs was nothing compared to this one. Ironically, despite its reliance on computer and internet technology, the music scene of today is in some ways closer to the world of pre-amplification, when music was purveyed solely in live settings—in living rooms, opera houses, band shells, and other stages. In olden days, music appreciation necessarily occurred in front of the performing artist; it didn't exchange hands in the form of a commodity (a record or CD) with a price tag on it, but was considered something of great value nonetheless.

Digital downloading has simultaneously moved the world of music both farther and closer to that ideal. It is farther, because listeners can transfer and access millions of songs in seconds. But it is closer, because musicians are forced to seek out their audiences in a far more intimate manner, and to put out their wares for a lot less compensation.

I'd like to think that this new process of musical transfer is less guided by gendered criticism than music was in the twentieth century, but there is evidence that this is not so. In January of 2012, Lana Del Rey (whose real name is Lizzie Grant) appeared on *Saturday Night Live* to sing her internet-hit song "Video Games." Clad in a skintight white gown that would make ninety-nine per cent of the female population of the planet look chubby, Del Rey was a striking figure. With her lacquered red hair swept back like Veronica Lake and a pouty mouth that's slightly askew, she is beautiful in the way that movie stars in the 1950s were: unique, passive, transfixing. Yet as she gripped the mike and began to sing, a wisp of anger began to waft across the twitterverse. By the time she'd finished

the evening, the internet was full of barbs and taunts, from actress Juliette Lewis's much heralded comment that "watching this 'singer' on SNL is like watching a 12-year-old in their bedroom when they're pretending to sing and perform" to more typical utterances like "I'd rather attend Tim Tebow's Bible camp than have to sit through another Lana Del Rey song." A few days later, a unanimous social media verdict seemed to have been reached that Del Rey's appearance was the worst ever seen on *SNL*. In online music circles like Pitchfork and Gawker, Del Rey was heralded as a no-talent viral sensation whose daddy bought her a recording contract.

Not everyone was against her. Daniel Radcliffe, who hosted that particular episode of *SNL*, commented: "people are making it about things other than the performance ... if you read what people are saying about her online, it's all about her past and her family and stuff that's nobody else's business."<sup>58</sup> But Radcliffe's reasoning was rare. The incident reminded me a lot of the reaction to Liz Phair, all those years ago. Like Del Rey, Phair was dismissed by a cadre of people who saw themselves as critically discerning as merely being sexy, rich, and lacking in talent, for not being really "of" the scene she inhabited, but being some kind of wannabe. She was especially ridiculed for being an unpersuasive live act: this proved, somehow, she hadn't paid her dues.

All those criticisms are undergirded in part by old-fashioned prejudices against pretty blonde female

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<sup>58</sup> TMZ, "Lana Del Rey Wasn't That Bad on SNL," January 17, 2012. <http://www.tMZ.com/2012/01/17/daniel-radcliffe-lana-del-rey-snl-defends/> (accessed January 2, 2014).

singers. But—and here is where the future looks brighter—although the online criticism leveled at Del Rey seems gendered, today such barbs can have little effect. When Phair was criticized for similar crimes by the cognoscenti whom she lived and played among, her album sales suffered. She wasn't played on mainstream radio, so she relied entirely on the indie rock network to garner acceptance, and that acceptance was partly stifled by the music aficionados who hated her and called her fake. Del Rey has been rejected by a similarly constructed network of music lovers, but today, there is another social network to take up the slack. Despite the Twittersmear after her appearance, the song "Video Games" became a genuine hit, downloaded at a record pace. She sold 77,000 copies of her debut album *Born to Die* in its first week, 20,000 more than *Exile* did the first year of its release.

The Lana Del Rey controversy (such as it is) proves that today's music listeners don't slavishly follow the sledgehammer opinions of tastemakers; thanks to the magic of digital technology, they have more opportunity to taste-make for themselves. So even though a certain set of indie rock insiders may air their opinions about what is and is not authentic at the top of their lungs, the consumers they are presumably courting are, if anything, even less responsive than they were in my day. In the past, a vicious critic could mock a record like Lana Del Rey's out of the public eye. Today, the target strikes back.

The death of the critic—or the critic's influence—is one of the biggest changes between 1993 and now. Another change between the year *Exile* was released and today is the pervasive level of female sexuality purveyed

by the mainstream media. When *Guyville* came out, Liz Phair was considered freakishly interested in sex—titillating, extroverted, a “superfreak” in the parlance of the day. Today, the blueness of her record might not raise the eyebrows of a ten-year-old. Consider, for example, the mainstream pop fare of the female artists like Rihanna, Britney Spears, Katy Perry, and Ke\$ha, all of whom frequently sing and mime sexually explicit songs, and all of whom are played on Radio Disney. One can’t help but wonder if these songs and actions are a part of third-wave feminism, or if they signify a lowering of sexual mores that has a whole different set of implications. Some feminist scholars argue that these women artists are, like Phair, championing female empowerment. For instance, in a recent issue of the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, academic Micha Cárdenas writes “the title of Ke\$ha’s song “We R Who We R” exhibits a mode of inhabiting norms by creating new norms within existing networks of power” and that her “appropriation of rap as a mode of singing that requires little or no talent demonstrates a misunderstanding of rap through Ke\$ha’s own white privileged subject position [yet] ... can be understood as an attempt to create femme solidarity by using a singing style that could apparently be performed by anyone.”<sup>59</sup> In lay terms, Cárdenas is saying that Ke\$ha’s boisterous claims and (apparent) lack of musical talent are acceptable, and even praiseworthy, because more white females are needed to forge audiences of the same.

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<sup>59</sup> Micha Cárdenas, “Blah, Blah, Blah: Ke\$ha Feminism?” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24.2, June 2012: 181.

I am not sure that's true of Ke\$ha, but it would have been nice if someone had said the same thing about Phair.

Although I personally prefer older incarnations of femme power (Patti Smith, Chrissie Hynde, Tina Weymouth, Aretha Franklin) that don't rely on sexual tropes to indicate empowerment, Katy, Ke\$ha, and the others probably aren't the worst thing that ever happened to pop. But there is an important difference between their risqué fare and Phair's. Unlike Liz Phair, these acts are also all multi-million sellers whose allusions to the pleasure they take in female sexuality are not only more overt (and more vulgar), but are also more phony. Their auto-tuned orgasms take place on the dance floor, in public, where men participate (if at all) by gawking at them, i.e. as spectators, rather than as equal partners or as friends. Moreover, technological advancements like cellphone cameras and YouTube videos have exacerbated the problems that can arise when female sexual empowerment goes along with male spectatorship.

Of course, the rise in sexual innuendo in mainstream pop is something that cannot be laid at Liz Phair's doorstep. She predated the cellphone camera, and the wildest she ever got was to imply that she liked being given—not giving—oral sex, which is a very different implication. Moreover, despite the critical acclaim she received for *Exile in Guyville*, she has experienced only a very limited amount of mainstream success. In the 1990s, after the controversy about her first record died down, Liz Phair recorded several indifferently received records for Atlantic Records and later for Capitol. *Exile in Guyville* was re-released in 2008 on Dave Matthews ATO label, but she was dropped before an album of new

material, entitled *Funstyle*, could be released: she put that one out herself. Today, Liz Phair tours and writes incidental music for television shows; she was nominated for a Grammy for her work on the updated version of *Beverly Hills 90210*. In short, she is doing well for an artist whose career began almost twenty-five years ago in the midst of a music business boom: better, perhaps, than many band members from her cohort who were unable to make the change from the embodied world of rock to a cyber-music model.

The boom is now bust, but with the bust comes the good news: for all the traces of Guyville that remain, the cyber model is what is bulldozing it over. Today, thanks to the digital music file format and file-sharing possibilities, the contrast between an independent music artist and a major label artist is not nearly as stark as it once was, either sonically, economically, or socially. There are plenty of little kids out there, brought up with iPod shuffles, who like both country and rap, who listen to good music and bad, without feeling that they've labeled themselves in any significant way.

Back in the day, recording for an independent label was a quasi-political choice. Many (though certainly not all) independent artists made a conscious decision to stay away from corporate labels; one aspect of that choice was to record music that was not designed sonically to be played on mainstream radio outlets, or to appeal to mainstream music fans. Independent label artists actually sounded different from major label ones (a fact which you will notice today if you put on *Exile in Guyville*: the lo-fi sound sounds quite bizarre next to the absolute clarity of a track recorded on protocols).

That changed after Nirvana became so monumentally successful on an independent label, Sub Pop. For a short while, the sonics of independence didn't necessarily bar a band from "going major"; in addition to the profusion of Nirvanbes (as the industry called them), other kinds of quirky and unusual acts—acts like Liz Phair—had a shot at success.

That lasted for a few years, through the death of Kurt Cobain and a little bit longer, to the turn of the twenty-first century. But then ... surprise! Along came Napster, the peer-to-peer file-sharing program that allowed users to download songs from other people's record collections without purchasing them (or even asking their permission). Instead of more and more bands getting tour buses and fancy hotel rooms and playing big arenas and buying mansions and becoming rock stars, the opposite happened. Today, nearly famous singers and songwriters and bands of all stripes and genres have had to downsize. They take to the road in cars and vans, stay in low-budget hotels, and market their own music. The superstar economy ensures that a very small number of acts stay in high rotation on children's radio stations: the already-famous (Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen, U2, etc.) and the synergistically multi-branded act (Britney Spears, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Miley Cyrus) get to make lots of money touring. But for those artists just starting out, or who were somewhere in the middle of their careers when file sharing began, the trajectory has changed somewhat—and changed across all genres.

There are a thousand sad stories of musicians who were dropped from their labels in the early 2000s, after the record industry realized the implications of the new

recording format. But there are hundreds of others who adapted, by starting their own downloading websites, where they get 100 per cent of the profit from each download, or by creating artistic cooperatives or opportunities that look nothing like the old model. Acts from both major and independent labels have had to adjust to the new reality of music dissemination, and some of them resent that, but the new reality isn't all bad. In the twentieth century, what was popular was decided by a handful of humans who heard music, guessed what might sell a lot, and then went about seeing that the music was marketed and distributed. Now the equation starts at the other end, with music fans finding music they like and downloading it. But it's a two-edged sword. On the one hand, fans get to hear more music for less money. On the other, artists are being under-remunerated, making artistry less appealing. After all, the science of amassing click-throughs, downloads, and followers is a very different business from recording in someone's home studio, practicing in a loft, and touring the country in a van.

I do grieve for the bands who deserve better and more. I do think that artists and musicians are an important part of our cultural economy, and should be paid as if they mattered, rather than asked to give their art away for free. But if there is an upside to this particular economic model, it is that the mechanisms that made Guyville what it was just aren't working very well. It no longer exists in the form that it once did for three simple reasons:

1. The pay scale for a rock musician—even for a successful musician—is now so precarious and so



low that it has become, like nursing, teaching, and majoring in English, a less-male-dominated field. This is not to say that a conscious decision is taking place in the hearts and minds of men everywhere to forego the joys of band-dom. But times are tough and it's a far riskier decision than it used to be. By and large, I'd say most women who joined bands never saw it as a permanent career path, whereas many men did. Today, both genders are equally clear on the impermanence of the position, and the shaky economy has made joining indie bands far less possible for everyone.

2. Being in a rock band is less romantic. Once upon a time, it may have seemed like a pure profession, akin to being a poet in the olden days. No one expected Percy Shelley to work the printing press that stamped his chapbooks, nor did Nick Drake put packing tape on the airmail boxes sending out copies of *Pink Moon*. In other words, you played your music, and other people lifted them bales by providing start-up money, selling records, moving units, and toting amps. Today, young musicians better understand that a vast majority of those jobs—and other new ones, like maintaining a website, a Twitter feed, and maybe even a server—will now be on their shoulders. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it takes a certain type of person to want to be both artist and small business owner, and it's not quite the same person as used to go into the field of indie rock. Of course, there will always be those musical guitar players who can do nothing else but play their heart out. But the vast majority of people in bands do not,

and never have, fit that description. Knowing at least something about indie rock used to be practically a given for any arty postgraduate type. Something else is taking up that space in culture right now—possibly knowing something about food.

3. Record collecting is no longer a competitive sport. As has been noted on previous pages, vinyl is no longer widely available (though of course it still exists), and even CD sales are hardly booming. For the vast majority of consumers, it does not make sense to pay large amounts of money for plastic objects that you store on shelves when you can pay small amounts of money for something essentially invisible that you can take with you in your pocket, anywhere you want to go. Today, what used to be called music collectors are called DJs, bloggers, and curators. Instead of going to record stores, they sit in front of a computer, listening and compiling in a far more anonymous manner.

Finally, today's artists are able to carve out their audiences in their own image, without resorting to middlemen to choose the canon. That means no artist today needs to depend on a chain of corporations and events to control his or her career. Artists need not change their music, or their look, or their lyrics, or their sound, to appeal to the lowest common denominator. And no artist needs to have his or her motives or authenticity and commitment questioned or belittled. Hence, many of the inadvertently masculine standards and overtones of the scene itself are in the process of being dismantled.

One result of this dismantling is that even the title *Exile in Guyville* is less explicable than it once was. It

described a moment in culture, a particular place and feeling that no longer really matters. But that also may be exactly why it has stood the test of time so well. Like many works of art that are embedded in specifics, it defines something tangible, unique, and complete. By contrast, “Tumbling Dice” and “Sweet Black Angel”—the whole Stones repertoire, really—are at bottom songs about *songs*: musically, they are reflections on rock (and its origin, blues) as a genre, which may be why real rock fans love them so.

*Exile in Guyville* is something else entirely. The mere fact that one can no longer listen to it on vinyl, that instead a typical first listen to it is detached from its context, may lessen its impact on audiences, but it also emphasizes its uniqueness. Whatever it may claim about itself, it is not a set of songs about songs: it is an autobiography of an era. It is the story about a girl and a time and a place. The audacity of creating a response record to *Exile on Main St.* may still resonate a little to some listeners, but it is no longer a key element necessary to understand it.

That said, for me personally, Guyville was an apotheosis. It was a paracosm, an imagined community, an era, a neighborhood, and a total state of mind. There is no longer any doubt about why *Exile in Guyville* speaks so eloquently to me: it is because when I was coming of age in San Francisco in the 1990s I lived in a little corner of Guyville without even knowing its name. It wasn't Chicago. But for a long time after the record first came out, Liz Phair was always sort of hovering over our scene, being referred to by someone, or talked about, or dissed. It often felt like she was always just around the corner.

A lot of the guys I knew bad mouthed that record: they said things like, “If she was a *guy* she wouldn’t get so much attention,” or, “She *slept* her way to being written about,” or, “She can’t play guitar!” or, “How come no one is writing about Tortoise, or Green, or Material Issue, or Big Black? They’re way better than her!” I recall there was a lot of resentment, even before the record came out.

And yet, when I first heard *Exile in Guyville*, I couldn’t believe it. A lot of it spoke to me so directly, and the parts that didn’t—the weird experimental parts—were either hilarious or, at the very worst, no worse than anything I had to suffer through on every other indie record. I would have been way too shy to speak to her, or even say any of this, but deep down I was happy for Liz Phair. That people paid attention to her at all—that alone seemed like a miracle. There was no one else like her. That is why today, if I hear “Divorce Song” or “Stratford-on-Guy,” or “Strange Loop,” I am completely overcome with nostalgia for those days, whether in San Francisco or Chicago—for walking down Valencia Street on a hot summer night, or heading for the El for a late-night cab ride through the snow, half drunk, with my ears ringing, for getting all dressed up with my girlfriends to go to a gig, for the sense we had, always, of absolutely owning that town.

And we *did* own the town, because we were young and foolish and had no expectations, because we didn’t care about the sound quality or the commercial motivations of our favorite acts, because we thought, even then, that one day we were going to move on and become successful, because we knew—the way women always know—that life wasn’t really about indie rock or music

or the moment or the meaning, but that life was about *life*. And *Exile in Guyville* was about life, much more than *Exile on Main St.* is ... that was what I loved about it, then and now, and why it's still one of my favorite records. The Replacements, Pixies, Fugazi, Nirvana ... the songs I once loved by those acts have faded entirely from the soundtrack of my past, but Liz's work still resonates in my mind. She is like one of my friends, her life laid out bare for me to participate in emotionally, any time I want to. Her art is my art in a way that I can't say about any other artist. Maybe that is one reason I don't miss Guyville, or Chicago, or my youth as an indie rocker, because I have that document of it, and I can immerse myself in it at will.

But I can also walk away from it and into the present, which is the place where I really reside. Presently I will get up from my table here at the Starbucks Gangnam and walk outside into a blisteringly hot evening. It's time to bid Guyville goodbye.

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